

# 1

## The context and concept of family partnership working

### This chapter covers:

- The context of the family in the twenty-first century.
- The concept of family involvement.
- The aims and goals of family partnership working.
- The characteristics of effective family educational partnership working.
- Key features that facilitate family involvement and partnership working.
- Overcoming barriers to family involvement and partnership working.
- Government expectations of the children's workforce in working with families.



### The context of the family in the twenty-first century

Educational settings and families share responsibilities for the socialisation of children. Children grow and develop within three important contexts:

- The family.
- The educational setting.
- The community.

Families are the first prime educators of their children and they continue to influence their children's learning and development throughout their school career and beyond. Families, as producers, consumers and disseminators of knowledge in the twenty-first century, are the most powerful factor affecting the lives and outcomes of children and young people.

On average, children spend 87 per cent of their time in a school year at home with their parents and other family members. Strengthening and further enhancing the connections within families, between families and with their communities and

the organisations that affect them has a greater positive effect on achievement, particularly when it is linked to children and young people's learning. When an educational setting builds positive partnerships with families that clearly respond to family members' concerns, and which acknowledge family contributions to the work of the setting and supporting their child's learning – including sharing joint power in decision making – then more successful sustainable family connections tend to prevail.

Three core elements are essential to strengthening families. These are:

- *Economic support*: employment, a living wage to meet basic family needs, building family assets to sustain a growing family through to retirement.
- *Family support systems*: for healthy family development, i.e. health services, child care, education.
- *Nurturing thriving communities*: access to affordable housing, safe neighbourhoods, leisure facilities and public amenities that promote social networking within and between families.

### The concept of family involvement

Effective educational settings have high levels of family, parental and community involvement because family involvement is central to the core business of the setting.

Family involvement refers to members of the child's family being actively, critically, resourcefully and responsibly involved in contributing to promoting and developing the well-being of their communities.

Family involvement with an educational setting is influenced by their relationships with teachers, children and other relevant aspects of the local context.

Family involvement with an educational setting is also driven by three factors:

- *Psychological motivation*: i.e. parents and families believe that they should be involved and that they really can make a difference to help children learn.
- *Invitations to become involved*: from the educational setting, their child or the child's teacher.
- *Family confidence*: the family/parents have the knowledge, skills, time and energy to become involved in supporting the child's learning and well-being, as well as supporting the work of the educational setting.

Joyce Epstein (1997) proposed a framework of involvement that is comprised of six main types of activities that help to connect families, schools and communities. These cover:

- *Parenting*: helping families develop parenting and child-rearing skills to ensure the health and safety of children, and to create a home environment that

encourages and supports every child's good behaviour and learning. This type of involvement also entails assisting educational settings in understanding their families, i.e. by providing activities that can help families to understand and promote their children's development.

- *Communicating*: developing an effective accessible and appropriate two-way communication between families and the educational setting/service relating to the work of the setting and children's progress and achievements.
- *Volunteering*: finding creative ways to involve families in the work and life of the educational setting while also ensuring safe recruitment, training and support for volunteers. Ensuring that the talents and interests of family volunteers match the needs of the pupils or students and the educational setting.
- *Learning at home*: informing and linking families with their children's curriculum through family learning activities that can be undertaken at home, in addition to supporting homework by offering practical guidance.
- *Decision making*: including families in the educational setting's decision-making process, in addition to encouraging them to be advocates, PTA or Family Forum members, on the governing body or other committees.
- *Collaborating with the community*: providing extended services and wrap-around-care for children and families, either operating from the educational setting or available at another local venue.

Success in each child's education is dependent on the involvement of their family. Children and young people are far more likely to view their education in a positive light, and be more receptive to learning, when their family is enthusiastic about and values education.

### The concept of family partnership working

Partnerships as a concept are a collaborative relationship that is designed primarily to produce positive educational and social effects on the child while being mutually beneficial to all the other parties involved.

Partnership, in relation to joint working with families, refers to the state of being an 'authentic' partner, a 'sharer', an associate engaged in a worthwhile undertaking with the educational setting where their child is being educated. There is no one-size-fits-all model of family partnership working, as the context of each educational setting will vary. However, the more often that teachers and educational settings reach out to parents and families, the more often that families from all socio-economic groups will make more of an effort to engage in the events and activities going on in that setting. The greater the constant drip-feed via newsletters, the educational setting's website, text messaging families, blogs, notices on the family/parent noticeboard in the main entrance of the setting, and of course word of mouth from Family Ambassadors and local Family Champions, the more likely it is that family engagement and participation will increase.

Partnerships with families need to be adapted to fit specific family conditions; demographic family patterns in the locality; children and young people's needs; the educational setting's context; and community resources.

## The aims and goals of family partnership working

The following aims and goals clarify the purpose in fostering and promoting family partnership working. These can inform the development of an agreed policy for family partnership working.

- Each partner is viewed as making equally valuable contributions while also respecting others' various contributions.
- Meaningful roles and activities for family members are created by the educational setting to help them support their child's learning at home.
- A wide range of approaches is identified to enable families and members of the community to be involved in activities at the educational setting.
- The educational setting provides in-house experiences for families that are positive, welcoming and responsive to family needs.
- Families are given appropriate opportunities to contribute to decision making and governance in the educational setting.
- The educational setting acts as a community learning centre that offers good quality educational, social and recreational activities to families.
- The needs and preferences of the families' children attending the educational setting are respected.
- The competencies of all key participants (e.g. governors, staff, the wider children's workforce) are developed to enable them to work and communicate with a diversity of families.
- The educational setting promotes greater continuity and congruence in joint partnership working with families in order to ensure smoother transitions at significant times in each child's educational career.
- The educational setting or service follows the four As of partnership working.

## The four As of working in partnership with families

These were put forward by Sheridan and Kratochwill (2007) and were seen as being important pre-requisites that could lead to better and more successful educational outcomes for children/young people.

1. *Approach*: two-way family participation and shared responsibility for educational outcomes.
2. *Attitudes*: together each achieves more by adopting a 'can do' attitude.
3. *Atmosphere*: the educational setting is a family-friendly community, with partnership built on a mutual respect.
4. *Actions*: all the strategies and practices that enable building a successful family-educational setting partnership (1 to 3 above) are in place.

The four As can also help families to understand the education system better. The families of children attending an educational setting provide a rich source of information and expertise that will help to build a strong learning community.

### The characteristics of effective family-educational setting partnership working

The central characteristics of effective family-educational setting partnership working include:

- sharing power, responsibility and ownership, with each party having different roles;
- a degree of mutuality, which begins with the process of listening to each other and incorporates responsive dialogue and fairness ('give and take') on both sides;
- shared aims and goals based on a common understanding of the educational needs of children and young people;
- a commitment to joint action, in which families, children, young people, governors, teachers and other staff work together;
- trust, negotiation and flexibility, with an agreement of purpose and desired outcomes existing between both parties;
- collaborative, interdependent and balanced relationships that exist among both parties;
- differences in perspectives between families and the educational setting are appreciated and seen as learning opportunities;
- there is a commitment to the cultural competence, values and traditions of the different families existing in the community;
- power is shared with families leading.



### Good practice example

Recruiting Family Partnership Leaders from members of children's families to work in partnership with staff, governors and members of the local community is a powerful strategy. These Family Partnership Leaders can take some of the operational duties off staff, e.g. the administration and organisation in running family activities and events at the educational setting. Through adopting a family-to-family approach, they can help to engage those families who would not otherwise participate in events or activities at the school when asked to do so by staff. Working through a family-led Action Team or Family Council ensures that families, and not teachers or governors, can take ownership of and greater responsibility for ensuring family projects and initiatives are relevant and better attended.

Promoting family leaders to shape family engagement activities is a useful and powerful strategy to adopt, i.e. family members provide the leadership, working in partnership with school staff, governors and members of the local community. Family members can also take on some of the administrative tasks in organising and running family activities and events at the educational setting, thereby taking the pressure off staff.

A family-to-family approach is seen as less daunting for some parents and families, particularly those who are less inclined to engage, thus encouraging wider family participation.

Effective family partnership working appears to work best when the educational setting's family strategy entails working through a family-led action team. This ensures that families and not the teachers or governors can take ownership and greater responsibility for ensuring continuity and the coordination of initiatives and projects to enhance, improve, promote and support children's learning within, and beyond, the school day.

Family partnership working with an educational setting or service is dynamic and changes over time, according to the nature of the activities, the resources available and the community context.

Any family partnership working model adopted by an education setting or service must:

- look at helping families in an enabling way;
- support families and not rescue them or do crisis management;
- work *with* families rather than 'do things to' families.

### Key features that facilitate family involvement and partnership working

- Appoint a designated non-teaching member of staff to take responsibility for coordinating and overseeing family partnership working.
- Have clear guidance, clarity of terminology and a family partnership policy and agreement in place.

- Develop a clear vision for family participation, i.e. *'Every Family Matters in this school community'*.
- Have strong senior leader commitment, passion and support in driving forward and sustaining a family-friendly partnership working culture.
- Form a family–staff action team to plan, organise, implement and monitor family partnership working across the educational setting.
- Nominate Family Ambassadors, Family Champions, or a local community Family Commissioner to be a 'voice' for families.
- Ensure an increased visibility and approachability of staff in the educational setting.
- Have a culture of actively listening to family concerns and issues.
- Have staff give prompt attention to addressing and responding to the concerns of families.
- Have a connection with local family interests, i.e. get out into the community to find out exactly what it is that families want provided at the educational setting.
- Utilise a range of different consultation and communication methods.
- Stimulate and encourage family creativity and initiatives.
- Provide opportunities for families to learn new things and new skills.
- Make one-to-one work with families available.
- Organise family events and activities to fit around their working hours and family arrangements, offering crèche facilities and access to ICT on site.
- Network locally to disseminate good practice with other settings and services as well as to share ideas and undertake joint problem solving.

## Overcoming barriers to family involvement and partnership working

Table 1.1 identifies common barriers to family involvement with schools and offers practical strategies for overcoming each one.

### Government expectations of the children's workforce in working with families

The core children's and young people's workforce for families comprises of:

- children's and families' social workers;
- foster carers and private foster carers;
- play workers;
- outreach and family support workers;
- Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) advisers;
- managers and staff in children and family centres and residential homes;
- portage workers.

**Table 1.1** Overcoming barriers to family involvement

Barriers to family involvement	Strategies to overcome barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of transportation and childcare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide transportation and a crèche</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of parenting skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide parenting skills workshops and support</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of sufficient resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide information about services and make any necessary referrals</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language difficulties and new arrivals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide translators and information in the family's first language</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anti-social or long working hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise breakfast meetings, evening meetings, or meet at family workplace or other neutral venue in the community</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings of alienation towards education, the school or teachers due to their own previous negative experience of schooling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide an intermediary such as a Family Champion, a Family Ambassador or Family Liaison worker and meet off-site</li> </ul>



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The wider children's and young people's workforce includes:

- parenting practitioners;
- adult social care workers;
- Supporting People teams;
- drug and alcohol workers;
- housing officers and accommodation support workers;
- Jobcentre Plus advisers;
- Child Support Agency workers.

The government expects those who work with parents and families to:

- focus on early intervention, engaging with the 'hard to reach' families;
- work together to make a real difference to children and families;
- listen to children, young people and families, designing and delivering services alongside them to build resilience and develop sustainable solutions;
- change service delivery methods in order to reach families, e.g. an online, virtual and multi-learning environment.
- support family volunteering.

The common core of skills and knowledge for the children and young people's workforce recognises the role that parents, carers and families play. Of the six areas of expertise, 'Effective communication and engagement with children, young people and families' is the first core area to be featured. Other core areas of expertise that touch on the family are listed in Table 1.2.

### The extended family in the twenty-first century

The national charity 4Children launched the Family Commission, a major inquiry into the extended family in the twenty-first century, in April 2009. The Family Commission asked 10,000 families across the UK what they thought about family life in Britain today.

The research focused on:

- gaining a better understanding of how families managed in a changing world;
- what the state could and should do to help families;
- exploring the tensions families experience;
- identifying the support families need in relation to housing, financial support, childcare, eldercare and social care;

**Table 1.2** Children's workforce national standards, knowledge and skills relating to working with families

Head Teachers' standards	Children's Centre Leaders' standards	Professional standards for teachers	National Occupational standards for TAs	Workforce common core of skills and knowledge
<p><b>Strengthening community</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know about the strategies that encourage parents and carers to support their children's learning.</li> <li>• Be able to create, build and maintain effective relationships and partnerships with parents and carers to support and improve pupils' achievement and personal development.</li> <li>• Seek opportunities to invite parents and carers, community figures, businesses or other organisations into the school to enhance and enrich the school and its value to the wider community.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Stronger families, stronger communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise expectations and aspirations so that families and the local community are encouraged to enjoy new opportunities for learning and better health.</li> <li>• Ensure effective and sustained outreach into the community so that the most disadvantaged families are identified and encouraged to engage with the children's centre.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Communicating and working with others</b></p> <p>Q4. Communicate effectively with children, young people, colleagues, parents and carers.</p> <p>Q5. Recognise and respect the contribution that colleagues, parents and carers can make to the development and well-being of children and young people and to raising their levels of attainment.</p>	<p><b>Liaise with parents, carers and families</b></p> <p>60.1 Establish and maintain relationships with parents, carers and families.</p> <p>60.2 Facilitate information sharing between the school and parents, carers and families.</p>	<p><b>Effective communication and engagement with children, young people and families</b></p> <p>1.6 Establish a rapport and build respectful, trusting, honest and supportive relationships with children, young people, their families and carers, which make them feel valued as partners.</p> <p>1.30 Understand that parents and carers are partners who have the lead role and responsibility for children and young people. Involving them in decisions affecting their child can have a positive effect on supporting their children to achieve positive outcomes.</p> <p><b>Child and Young Person development</b></p> <p>2.16 Know and recognise the child or young person's position in their family or caring network, as well as in a wider social context. Appreciate the diversity of these networks.</p> <p>2.19 Understand and take into account the effects of different parenting approaches, family structures and composition, backgrounds and routines.</p> <p>2.21 Understand how children or young people may be affected by underlying problems faced by them or their families or their peers.</p> <p>2.29 Understand that families, parents and carers should be treated as partners and respected for their lead role and responsibility in addressing the specific needs of their child.</p>
				<p><b>Supporting Transitions</b></p> <p>4.20 Know that in some family situations you may need to be more proactive about involving services – for example, if you know that parents or carers have not accepted help, but are continuing to experience problems with their child's behaviour.</p>



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- examining the future needs of families;
- recommending solutions for ways forward and next steps in order to improve the dynamics between the state and families.

Families perceived the state as either ignoring them or trying to take them over. Families undoubtedly remain the most important determinant of each child's life chances and are crucial to their futures. Family matters to every child, and every family matters in the big society.

Family services in Britain have had a tendency to focus on families in acute crisis, leaving the remainder to struggle and cope alone. The state and its services have failed to understand the reality of modern family life, from changes in family structure and relationships to economic pressures and work-life balance, in addition to inadequately preparing future parents for parenthood. Families also considered that public services in Britain had remained over-bureaucratic and inflexible.

One in three families relied on grandparents to provide childcare and there were between 200,000 to 300,000 grandparents raising grandchildren. Increased longevity has resulted in more generations of the same family coexisting.

Key findings arising from the family inquiry report published in October 2010 indicated that:

- financial hardship was the biggest strain on family relationships;
- unconditional love was the favourite thing about family life;
- families would welcome more advice and information to help them when things went wrong within a family;
- the future of their children was a concern and worry for families;
- families would welcome more flexibility from employers to help them balance work and family life;
- families with older relatives considered that they did not get enough help from the government with eldercare;
- families considered that schools were family friendly in the way that they worked with them.

The Family Commission, however, wants schools to begin thinking about more ways in which they could engage with other members of a child's extended family (i.e. dads, grandfathers, uncles and aunts) in activities to support that child's learning and well-being. Family-friendly schools must not mean just 'mother-friendly'. In addition, schools must continue to work with other agencies in order to help them provide the best support to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families.

The Family Commission reached the following conclusions:

- professionals working with families must help them develop their own sustainable solutions to resolving problems;
- the value of the extended family should be recognised;
- professionals should work with families early on in order to make a real difference;
- families prefer help from their peers, friends and relatives foremost;
- families value receiving practical parenting strategies in bringing up children throughout the full age range, i.e. particularly in how to cope with teenagers growing up;
- families want professionals working with them to adopt a positive tone that recognises and appreciates the strengths that exist within the family;
- families value professionals who understand their family life context and who keep their promises of help and deliver what they said they would.

The following recommendations were made in the Family Commission's report.

- Keep families united wherever possible, by providing mediation, relationship support and practical help and advice.
- Build great neighbourhoods for families through local authorities consulting with and considering the needs of families, and planning and developing appropriate local services to meet those needs.
- Help families to become economically dependent and in work through employers providing family-friendly jobs, flexible leave and working hours, and flexible childcare for families with toddlers and teenagers.
- Extend the role of children's centres to become Children and Family Centres, acting as a community hub for family activities, parenting support, family-to-family mentoring, and the provision of family outreach workers in schools.
- Support families when things go wrong by offering support from professionals in a Family Support Team working in and around Children and Family Centres and schools in areas of disadvantage.
- Make family intervention programmes available to those families whose children are at risk of being taken into care.
- Provide more help to enable families to resolve their own problems and offer greater support for kinship care.

 **Points to remember**

- The family is the prime educator of the child.
- Success in a child's education depends on family involvement.
- Work with families rather than doing things to families.
- Start from where families are and not from where you think they should be in relation to joint partnership working.

 **Questions for reflection**

Leaders of an educational setting or service, working with a diversity of families, need to seek the answers to these questions, in order to better inform the planning and provision of appropriate activities and events for families.

- Is there a common shared and agreed understanding among the different stakeholders as to what family partnership working means in the context of the educational setting or service?
- To what extent is family partnership working occurring successfully?
- Who considers family partnership working to be currently effective?
- Who are the 'hard to reach' families in your community?
- What actions are you planning to take in order to engage these 'hard to reach' families?

**Downloadable materials** 

For downloadable materials for this chapter visit [www.sagepub.co.uk/familypartnership](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/familypartnership)

Table 1.1 Overcoming barriers to family involvement

Table 1.2 Children's workforce national standards, knowledge and skills relating to working with families