



HighLight Key – Parents, Guardians and Carers

Recognition is needed that parents/guardians/carers legally have responsibility for the education of their children and are partners with schools in this process. Education outside of the home, whether in or out of school, should serve them and enable them in their role. The ideal aim is to provide greater consistency in the values of home and school.

A parent should always be there for you, teach you, be a mentor, a friend when needed, help you with decisions and be stern when needed.

The involvement of parents, carers and guardians in the education and development of children is crucial. The terms of parents, carers and guardians in the UK are considered for the purposes of this paper to mean as follows:-

Parents: Father or mother of the child: one who begets, gives birth to, or nurtures and raises a child; a father or mother.

Guardian: A legal guardian is a person who has the legal authority (and the corresponding responsibility) to care for the personal and property interests of a child; often this is the parent. In the cases of children with a Care Order (issued by the courts), it is the Local Authority, and in the case of the death of the parents it may be someone appointed in their will.

Carers: There are many different forms of Foster Care, but generally this means when children do not live with their parents day-to-day, and while some elements of Parental Responsibility remain with the Parents (or Local Authority) the Carer has day-to-day responsibility for ensuring the child's needs are met. Sometimes this is another family member.

For the purpose of this paper, the term parent will be assumed to be “a person who brings up and cares for a child, a primary care-giver of a child's basic needs”, and therefore in a school setting, includes parents, carers and guardians who are actively involved in the care of the child.

Parents are the Child's First Teacher

A child's parents are their first teachers during the crucial first few years of a child's life. Even after children have started school, their contact time with parents is greater than the time they spend at school. Repeated UK governments acknowledge the importance of improving the life chances of the youngest children and recognise support and training for parents of very young children to be vital. Many UK churches and other organisations have acknowledged this importance in providing Children's Centres, Nurseries and Playgroups. It is generally recognised that the first seven years of a child's life, including the impact of pre-school years, are crucial formative years of a child's life. There are several quotations which are considered to be linked to the Jesuits:

"Give me the child until he is seven and I care not who has him thereafter."

"Give me the child, and I will mould the man."

"Give me the child till the age of seven and I will show you the man."

The first and most important learning in a child's life happens within the family. Children learn from the way people treat them and from what they see, hear and experience starting as soon as they are born.

Children are natural learners between birth and five years, and especially up to three years, children grow and learn at the fastest rate of their lifetime. It is easy to see the enormous opportunity parents, and those who care for children, have in these early years to help shape a child's learning before they start school.

How children learn

- There are many ways of learning. Children learn by watching, by listening and especially by doing.
- All children go through a number of stages but there are differences between children within each stage. There are also differences in the length of time it takes for children to move from stage to stage.
- Children do best in an environment which is interesting and where they feel loved and safe.

The pre-school child is busy talking, exploring and playing. All of these activities are important for his or her growth and development, and for learning communication skills.

How Parents Facilitate Language Development

The child will need well-developed communication skills when it's time to start going to school - to make friends, learn new things, and start learning to read and write. Communication skills are crucial to a child's future success. Parents and pre-school workers play an important part in the child's ongoing communication development. Talking, listening and playing with the child will help to build the skills he or she needs to succeed, both in school and in life.

Researchers have found that in all languages, parents use a style of speech with infants known as **infant-directed speech**, or *motherese* (aka "baby talk"). If you've ever heard someone speak to a baby, you'll probably recognize this style of speech. It is characterised by a higher-pitched intonation, shortened or simplified vocabulary, shortened sentences and exaggerated expressions. Instead of saying "Let's go home," a parent might instead say "Bye-bye time."

Infant-directed speech has been shown to be more effective in getting an infant's attention as well as helping language development. Researchers believe that the use of 'motherese' helps babies learn words faster and easier. As children continue to grow, most parents naturally adapt their speaking patterns to suit their child's growing linguistic skills.

Stages of Language Development

1. **Babbling:** The first stage of language development is known as prelinguistic (babbling or cooing). During this period, which typically lasts from the age of three to nine months, babies begin to make vowel sounds such as *oooooo* and *aaaaaaa*. By five months, infants typically begin to babble and add consonant sounds to their sounds such as *ba-ba-ba*, *ma-ma-ma* or *da-da-da*.
2. **Single Words:** The second stage is known as the one-word or 'holophrase' stage. Around the age of 10 to 13 months, children will begin to produce their first real words. While children are only capable of producing a few, single words at this point, it is important to realise that they are able to understand considerably more than they can say. Infants begin to comprehend language about twice as fast as they are able to produce it.
3. **Two Words:** The third stage begins around the age of 18 months, when children begin to use two word sentences. These sentences usually consist of just nouns and verbs, such as "Where daddy?" and "me go"

4. **Multi-word Sentences:** Around the age of two, children begin to produce short, multi-word sentences that have a subject and predicate. For example, a child might say "Mummy is nice" or "Me want more sweets."

As children age, they continue to learn more new words every day. By the time they enter school around the age of four plus, children typically have a vocabulary of 10,000 words or more.

Parental Involvement in School

Schools should consider the continuing education of parents as vital in the role of continuing the education of children. Further development of each child should be seen as a key partnership between parents and school. Good communication oils the wheels of this process. The partnership is important for the following reasons:

- It continues to enable parents to be involved in a key way in their children's education.
- It ensures communication and information sharing about current and future health issues
- It helps protect children from risky situations, both now and in the future
- It ensure parents feel comfortable advocating for their children
- It jointly promotes positive attitudes and behaviour in the child

When parents and schools work together, they can deliver clear, consistent messages to children; encourage the development of positive health and academic behaviours among children; encourage children to value education; assist children in getting necessary care and access to resources and support networks.

There is much research into the benefits for children of their parents engaging with school – all the research points to the fact that children of parents who engage and support their child's school will be healthier, happier and achieve better academic results.

(<http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/protected/ppss/docs/parental-involvement-in-their-children.pdf>)

There are many, many ways in which schools work practically to engage and work with parents for the benefit of the children in their care. Here are some of them:

- Holding a range of induction events before their child starts school – making them friendly and as informal and informative as possible with opportunities for school nurse, Chair of Governors, Chair of PTA, and any other relevant associates to speak.
- Holding "Six Weeks In" events when children have been in school half a term to review how things are going and any concerns parents may have.

- Parent workshops – on a range of issues, e.g. subject training for parents (such as Maths, Phonics), social issues (such as use of internet, drugs, behaviour).
- Family Learning – in which the children and parents attend together to learn something new. This could be, for example, using digital photography to make films, First Aid for beginners, cooking for health, or enjoying the outdoors. The spectrum is vast and simply requires imagination.
- Encouraging parents to help with homework – particularly ‘take-away tasks’ which are set as fun family learning opportunities (e.g. get a photo of yourself by a river and research that river – present finding in a creative way)
- Holding consultation meetings (with the child if possible) so that an open and frank discussion can be held to celebrate the child’s strengths and share in supporting areas needing improvement.
- Holding Curriculum News events for parents at the start of each term, so that parents are aware of what the children will be learning and are encouraged to offer support in a range of ways (hearing children read at home, help with school trips, help in class – regularly or occasionally for focus events)
- “Fantastic Finishes” to topics so that parents can celebrate the work their children have achieved. This involves a concluding activity connected to the topic or theme studied e.g. an African –style shop after a theme on Africa; an Ugly Bug Ball after a topic on ‘Mini-beasts’.
- Assemblies in which their children are taking the lead, and special services, maybe at the local church
- Dramatic/Musical events involving their children
- Setting up a Parent-Teacher Association and encouraging parents to join this.
- Newsletters – these should be regular, and if numbered, give parents the opportunity to ‘spot’ if they have missed one. They could each be on different coloured paper. Include a list of dates coming up.
- Year Book sent home in the first few days of term with important information such as ‘If your child is ill...’ and ‘School Uniform’ list. Also include some useful contact details, not only of the school staff, but also other useful organisations – which could, in church schools include contact details for the local churches.
- Hold “Meet the Head” sessions regularly with tea and biscuits either to discuss specific developments or to give parents an opportunity to raise concerns and questions. It can also be effective for parents to be met and asked personally on the school playground as they collect their children.

Communication between parents and school is vital. When ‘issues’ arise which create misunderstanding or conflict it is wise for the parents to have been previously informed at the start of their child’s school career that children can bring home ‘slanted news’ i.e. they may , for

various reasons, not be reporting the accurate account of events. Parents should ideally be encouraged to ring up the school and get the teacher's perspective. It can be useful in the school's handbook or year book to put the email address of the teacher concerned. In addition, it is wise to realise that sometimes parents' responses are coloured by their own negative experience of school. Teachers also should take the initiative to communicate directly where problems have occurred. Disagreements, bullying, misunderstandings all need dealing with quickly and thoroughly.

The vital importance of this partnership between parents and schools needs to be demonstrated not only in meetings and events but in the relational style of head and teachers towards parents so that they feel respected, supported and not judged. When, in turn, parents are supportive to the head and staff, a dynamic is created which will only benefit the children and all concerned.