

Engaging Parents Toolkit

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1. Introduction

This toolkit is designed to help schools plan and enact their support for and engagement with parents.

Based on the research literature in the field, this tool kit offers the background to parental engagement, and some basic suggestions. It also provides a list of further sources of information.

What it does not do is set out a specific framework or set of practices. One of the clearest messages from more than 25 years of research is that engaging with parents must be context-specific to be successful. This means that each school needs to create its own plans for working with parents. This toolkit will support you in making those plans, carrying them out, evaluating what you have done, and continuing to move forward.

This toolkit was originally used with 34 schools in Wiltshire in a pilot project, and has been substantially updated on the basis of the results of that project (Goodall 2017a, Goodall 2018c).

By using this toolkit, your school is also enhancing our knowledge of parental engagement.

1.1. Consent form

This form provides the consent from your school to be involved in this process, and for information from the use of this toolkit to be used in further work, including publications. All data used will be anonymised.

On behalf of _____ school _____, I accept the use of the Engaging Parents Toolkit.

Using the toolkit incurs no cost to the school. By using this toolkit, you give your consent to being contacted by the University of Bath in regard to the impact its use has had on your practice and school.

The toolkit itself remains the property of the University of Bath. The toolkit may be copied as needed by your school. If you wish to share it more widely, for example with a cluster of schools, then please contact Janet on the address below.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Email address: _____

Please return this signed form, either copied or scanned, to me at j.s.goodall@bath.ac.uk.

1.1. Using this toolkit

Welcome to the Parental Engagement Toolkit!

Using this toolkit will enable you to plan, and, importantly, chart and evaluate your progress toward engaging with parents, and helping them to engage with their children's learning.

The toolkit contains various sections.

The first is an explanation of the toolkit, and the ideas that have informed it.

The second section allows you, as a school, to look at where you are now, what your practice is, good and needing improvement, at the moment

The third section looks to the future: where would you like to be, and how will you get there?

The fourth section includes a table that allows you to plan for, and chart, the milestones in your parental engagement journey.

The fifth section includes evaluation forms, which should be used to periodically take stock of both your progress and the toolkit itself. These evaluation forms REMEMBER TO CHANGE THE FORMS are an integral part of the process toward your goals. It can be tempting to skip this step, but it is important not to do so. Using the toolkit is a cyclic, ongoing process, and evaluating practice, progress and impact to date will allow you to be clear about what steps need to be taken next.

The final section includes references.

1.2. Parental Engagement

For many years, the academic and practice literature has shown the value of parental engagement with children's learning (Epstein and Sheldon 2000, Fan and Chen 2001, Wu and Qi 2006, Jeynes 2007, Harris and Goodall 2008, 22, Fan and Williams 2010, Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, Gorard, See et al. 2012, Rogers, Markel et al. 2014, Huat See and Gorard 2015, Goodall 2017c, Barbour, Eisenstadt et al. 2018). A recent review of evidence suggested that parental engagement with learning was the only method of seeking to narrow the achievement gap with enough evidence to be considered a causal factor (Gorard, See et al. 2012). An earlier review had already stated:

Parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, 4).

It is important to note before moving on that 'parent' in this context means any adult with a significant caring responsibility for the child, whether this is a parent, carer, grandparent or other relative, or other adult; the term should not be understood to mean only blood parents and certainly not to be a synonym for 'mother' (Vincent and Warren 1998, Reay 2002, Shuffelton 2015, Goodall 2019).

Parental engagement is of particular value in working to narrow the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds (Fan and Chen 2001, Goodall 2017c), particularly as so much of this gap seems to be based on issues that arise from the difference in social and cultural capital between different groups of parents (Lamont and Lareau 1988, Lareau 1998, Sampson 2007, Lareau 2011). However, rather than thinking about 'narrowing the gap', it is more useful – and more supportive of parents and families – to think about fulfilling the educational debt (Ladson-Billings 2006); the gap is not one of families' making, it is a systemic issue (Goodall 2017c), and an equitable education (schooling) is a debt we owe to all children and young people.

It is also important to be clear what is meant by ‘parental engagement in children’s learning’. This term does *not* denote getting parents into school, increasing numbers at parents’ evenings, or ensuring that parents interact more with the school. Rather, it relates to the interactions between parents and children, interactions which are concentrated around learning (Goodall 2017c); these interactions can take place at school (for example, in shared family learning activities) but are more likely to take place away from school, hence the designation of the ‘home learning environment’ (Sylva, Melhuish et al. 2004).

This may raise the question of why schools should, then, be involved at all, if this is an issue, an activity which takes place outside of schools: are schools stepping outside of their bounds here?

If schools were to *dictate* how parents behaved at home with their children, this would indeed be the case. However, we have moved past behaving this way toward children in the classroom – we no longer foster a belief in a ‘banking model of education’ (Freire 1970) which sees children as empty vessels to be filled. We also need to move past this in relation to parents, and see them as equal partners in supporting the learning of their children (Goodall 2017b). What this toolkit advocates is that school staff work in partnership with parents, to support learning. School staff and parents share an interest in the good of the child; this is the foundation for the partnership between school staff and families (Goodall 2017c).

The types of parental engagement this toolkit aims to support include reading at home with children (Goodall 2018b, Sylva, Jolley et al. 2018), discussions with older and younger children (Programme for International Student Assessment 2012), helping with homework, and generally taking an interest in the child’s learning (Goodall 2017c). Again, it is important to emphasise that ‘getting parents into school’ is not the ultimate aim of the toolkit, although it can be one step along the many paths to supporting parental engagement, but only one step. It is also important to note that many parents may be involved with learning at home, who never set foot in school (Epstein and Sheldon 2000); these parents – and their children – are as deserving of support as all other families in the school (Goodall 2017c, Goodall 2019).

1.3. Centred around learning

The value of parental engagement is to be found in supporting children’s learning, which is, after all, the prime purpose of schools and schooling. For some schools, this may require a shift in thinking, away from supporting *the school* to supporting *learning*, particularly in relation to the role of parents and families. It may be worth considering moving learning to the centre of all meetings (Goodall 2017e). When considering interventions or changes to support parental engagement, be sure that these are centred around supporting pupils’ learning, inside or outside of school.

1.4. Good practice in supporting parental engagement

While there is a good deal of literature around the value of parental engagement, and a seemingly endless array of interventions to support parents, there is far less literature which shows which of those interventions (or attitudes, or other changes) are effective.

The following list is based on a wide ranging literature review (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011) as well as other literature in the field, and highlights practices which have been shown to be effective. This list is neither exhaustive nor complete; it is here to give you a very basic overview of the issues involved. Please follow the references (information about references is given in full in the final section) for more information.

1.4.1. It is important to take a whole school approach

Schools should see engagement of parents in their children's learning as embedded into the life of the school, not as a 'bolt on' extra. Interventions should be informed by an ongoing parental needs assessment in the context of a school improvement strategy. Or, better yet, support for parents should be part of a whole school learning improvement strategy (Goodall 2017e), because all family and parent support activities should have the improvement of children's learning as a clear and consistent goal. It is also important that school leaders are involved in supporting parental engagement (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011).

1.4.1.1. Take into account the needs of staff

Initial and continuing teacher training rarely touches on the importance, value or nature of parental engagement in children's learning (Willemse, Thompson et al. 2018). We have found that school staff often lack the training or confidence to work with parents and families (Goodall 2018a). You would not expect staff to be able to teach a new curriculum without support and training; you would not expect early years staff to teach A level without re-training, or vice versa. So why would we expect staff who are highly trained, competent professionals in one area, to be competent in another without further support and training? Working with parents or other adults requires knowledge and skills that teachers need to acquire, just as they did the knowledge and skills for working with young people. It is also important to consider increasing capacity within a school or between a group of schools; we know that staff often learn best from each other (Goodall, Day et al. 2005, Barbour, Eisenstadt et al. 2018, Goodall 2018b), so arranging space for teachers and other members of staff to share and consider good practice is useful.

1.4.2. Involvement of stakeholders

A parental engagement strategy should be outward facing, involving not only the views of parents, but the evidence and expertise of other schools and services in the community; these stakeholders should be not only *considered* but *involved* in planning and implementation of any support for parental engagement. The idea is to build a partnership between families and schools, based on the mutual desire for the good of the child (Goodall 2017c, Goodall and Weston 2018).

The transfer of knowledge and understanding about supporting students should be part of a two way process: not only from school to home but from home to school (Goodall 2016, Goodall 2017c). Building home-school links through out of hours' clubs, parenting classes, extended schools and outreach work can lead to improvements in completion of homework, learning behaviours and improved attendance (Goodall 2018c).

1.4.3. Barriers to engagement

Parental engagement strategies need to consider barriers that inhibit or restrict parental involvement with schools, and engagement with learning, including the practical barriers of cost, time and transport, and particularly issues around parental role construction and parents' views of their own confidence in supporting learning (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 2005, 39, Walker, Wilkins et al. 2005, Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, Goodall 2017b).

Solutions to these problems can include practical ideas such as car-pools, involving children in school based parental activities, and taking account of parental work schedules when organising programmes and activities like meetings with teachers (Goodall and Weston 2018). Other solutions require more thought and understanding of the situations and contexts of parents; one of the most important first steps is to understand your families as unique and different, in the same way that you understand your students as being different, and unique individuals.

1.4.4. The importance of evaluation

Schools often do not collect sufficient data on their own interventions, particularly relating to the impact on academic outcomes (Goodall, Day et al. 2005). However, without clear information about the impact of activities, it is impossible to know which activities should be continued, and which should be forgone or significantly change. It is important to collect evaluation data not only at the time of an intervention, event or change, but also some months down the line, when the impact will be more (or

less) obvious. (See (Goodall and Weston 2018) for suggestions on how this can be done).

1.4.5. Support and Training for Parents : With, not To

Parental support programmes can yield a range of benefits, such as parental acknowledgement that their child is facing issues, (academic, conduct or both), parents attaining the skills and knowledge they need to support their children, and increases in parental confidence in supporting learning (Barbour, Eisenstadt et al. 2018). Programmes can also have significant impact on the relationships between parents and staff, and even between parents and their children and between siblings (Goodall 2018b). The evidence around programmes to support parental engagement with learning is most clear in relation to literacy (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011), but impacts have been reported for many other areas, as well.

It is interesting that in the UK, we have a universal provision of antenatal classes, (through the NHS) yet do not have such provision for parenting classes or support (Goodall 2017d). One of the results of this lack of provision is a perception on the part of many parents – and others- that parenting classes are for those who are failing at being a parent, for those who are ‘poor parents’ (Dempster, Wildman et al. 2013, Cullen, Cullen et al. 2016, Goodall 2019). Sensitivity is needed in setting up and naming programmes for parents and other family members; any such intervention or event is much more likely to be effective when planned with parents, rather than for them(Goodall and Weston 2018).

Support for parental engagement is far more likely to be successful if it is informed by a needs analysis as a first step, particularly if parents are involved in collecting and analysing the data (Goodall and Weston 2018). Parents often report feeling judged or intimidated by staff (Harris and Goodall 2008); this can often be the case when staff do not mean to be judgemental. It is important to remember that parents will not come to school and schooling context-free, and that one of the biggest barriers to parental engagement is parents’ own experience of education (Harris and Goodall 2008) and a resulting lack of confidence in their ability to support learning (Barbour, Eisenstadt et al. 2018).

1.5. Using the Toolkit

From what has been written above, you can see the importance of supporting parents to engage with their children’s learning – in school, but most importantly, at home, away from school. Parents and families are the first educators of children, and that role changes, but does not stop, once children enter formal education, whether this is in early years, or primary school, and the role continues as long as children and young people are in the schooling system.

The next few sections will help you to determine first where you are, in terms of supporting parental engagement, then where you want to be, and how you wish to get there.

It is important to say at this point, that this is not a solo exercise: it is best to work through the following forms in groups, perhaps at a staff meeting, and even better still to work through them with parents and families: children and young people can have a powerful part to play in supporting their own parents. Depending on the parents in your school, it may be possible to work through these forms as they stand, or it might be better to adapt them into a questionnaire or items for a focus group discussion: you know your parents best (or will do, as you move through this process) and as a teacher, you are experienced and skilled in adapting resources for different learners and groups.

2. Where we are now : The Present

You can use this audit tool to examine your *current* practice in relation to parental engagement. You can tick one of three boxes for each section below: establishing (you are in the early days of doing this), extending (you are part of the way to doing this) or enhancing (you have accomplished a great deal of this and are building on your success to date). (Note that none of these offers the option of being "finished", as supporting parental engagement with children's learning is never entirely finished – each new cohort of parents and pupils will need support) (Goodall 2017c) . There are a number of issues listed – you may also want to add your own, to highlight your good practice, no matter how far along you are in the process.

Please also add a comment about what evidence you have about each point. This evidence should be something which can be demonstrated to an outsider; for example, if you are in the early stages of making the school welcoming, you might recently have added signs in languages other than English to the lobby, or perhaps added a clear map of the classrooms to the school website (Goodall and Weston 2018).

Parental Engagement Practice ¹	Establishin	Enhancing	Extending	Evidence
The school is welcoming, as soon as parents enter the building or come on the site				
Parents know how to contact the member of staff they need to speak to				
The school web page is parent friendly, and parents can find the information they need ²				
The school knows enough about its cohorts of parents to be able to support them				
The school supports parental engagement in children's learning				
Parents know the targets set for their children, and how the children can achieve those targets				
Parental engagement is mentioned in all appropriate school policies				
The school offers structured activities for family learning				
Induction/transition practices support parental engagement in learning				
The school often reiterates to parents the value of their engagement in children's learning				
The school helps parents have high aspirations for their children				
The school helps parents know how to help children achieve those aspirations				
Staff receive training about parental engagement				
There is a feedback loop so parents know how their suggestions/complaints are dealt with				
The school fosters interactive homework that involves parents				
The parents council functions well to support parents and the school				
Parent governor posts are filled				
The governing body is representative of the backgrounds of the parent body				

¹ Feel free to expand this list to suit your needs; you will find many more suggestions in (Goodall and Weston, 2018).

² Depending your parents, it may also be a very good idea to ensure that your website is easy to read on a phone, as many parents use phones to access the internet

3. Where we want to be : The Future

You can use this audit tool to look at where you want to be in the future, and how you will get there: you can fill in the intervening steps, charting milestones, and, importantly, when you expect to reach those milestones, and who will be in charge of steering your progress toward those goals.

It's best to work in groups to fill in all charts, rather than delegating charts to individuals. Involve parents and students in filling in the charts, as well; it is after all, in everyone's interest to get this process right and to continue to make it work as well as possible.

3.1. Wishlist

The wish list represents the situation you would like to attain in your school, in relation to parental engagement, or the things that flow from parental engagement.

It is important to be clear about what you want to achieve – such clarity greatly increases your chancing of achieving your aims (Grayson 2013). Wishes should be **SMART** - specific, measurable, assignable (that is, you know who is responsible), realistic and time-limited.

This means that “engage more with parents”, while a worthy aim, is not a useful wish. It's lacking in many of the SMART areas.

Instead, a good wish might be, “make contact over positive issues with all year 10 parents this term – year 10 staff”. This is specific (positive contact), measurable (contacts might be entered into the MIS system or on a dedicated database), it's assigned to a group of staff, it's realistic, and it's time limited (a term). The only way you will be able to know you have accomplished your goals – and had an impact on pupils – is by having clear aims at the outset and evaluating them rigorously.

Even though these wishes are listed and evaluated individually, it's important not to lose the overall picture; the most effective engagement with parents arises from a holistic view of parental engagement, that permeates all areas of the school (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011).

Use this list to imagine where you would like to be, in terms of parental engagement. At the moment, don't worry about timelines, resources, or barriers. Just list what you would like to see in your school, in relation to parental engagement.

Wish List

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.

3.2. Barriers

Now, list any barriers that might impede realisation of your wishlist. Some wishes may have more than one barrier.

Wish	Barrier
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	
11.	
12.	
13.	
14.	
15.	

Having listed these barriers, you now need to consider how you will overcome those barriers? Some barriers may need more than one action.

Again, it is important to remember that you are not attempting to do this on your own (Goodall and Weston 2018); this is an effort you are making with the entire school community.

Please use the chart on the next page to list the ways you will work to overcome barriers, and the final chart to create a detailed action plan. In this last chart, it's important to add items to the "evidence" column; how will you know you have achieved your aims?

3.3. Overcoming Barriers

Wish	Barrier	How to overcome
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		
11.		
12.		
13.		
14.		
15.		

4. Milestones

The final chart brings all these ideas together: where you want to be, how you will get there, and importantly, who will be responsible for getting you there, and how you will know you have arrived.

The chart is entitled, 'Milestones', rather than 'Endpoints' in recognition that parental engagement – rather like teaching children – is not a once-for-all-time event; rather it is a an ongoing process. Just as you adapt your teaching for each new group of young people, indeed, perhaps for each new young person, supporting parental engagement needs to change with each new cohort of parents and sometimes even with each individual family (parents are, after all, at least as individual as children, having had more time to amass and be influenced a range of different experiences).

Milestones

Barrier	Milestone	When	Who	Evidence	Milestone	When	Who	Evidence	Milestone	When	Who	Evidence	Wishlist
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	

		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	
		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence		When	Who	Evidence	

5. Evaluation Form

Please send a copy of this form, once a term (or more often if you like) to Janet Goodall at j.s.goodall@bath.ac.uk

Thank you for filling in these forms; they will help to make the toolkit better and of more use to schools.

These forms aim to go beyond the usual “happy sheet” evaluations, so that they provide useful information, without taking too much of your time.

The evaluation forms are loosely based on the work of Guskey (Guskey 2000). Guskey’s well known framework has five levels: participant satisfaction, participant learning, organisational change, participant use of learning and pupil outcomes. The third and fourth of Guskey’s levels have been collapsed here, as the toolkit is designed to work on an organisational level.

Termly Evaluation Form

School name:

Date:

1. Satisfaction

This section looks at how easy the toolkit was to use, and which sections were used. Please tick one box for each section and then rate the usefulness of the sections from 1 – 5.

Section	Didn't use this section	Used this section a bit	Used this section a lot	Usefulness rating for this section (1 not useful – 5 very useful)
Where we are now				
Working backwards				
Working forwards				
Wish list				
Barriers				
Overcoming Barriers				
Milestones				

2. Learning

This section explores what you have learned through your use of the toolkit this term.

What we have learned about:	
The school	
Our parents	
Working with parents	

3. Change

As a result of using the toolkit this term, what have you changed?

4. Effects

What have been the effects of using the toolkit this term?

On the school	
On work with parents	
On parents	
On pupils	

The best thing about using the toolkit this term was:	
The worst thing about using the toolkit this term was:	
Suggestions for improvement:	

Thank you for completing this evaluation form. Please send it to Janet Goodall at j.s.goodall@bath.ac.uk.

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³ Always check the University pages for academic's work, as it is often available there free of charge – most of Goodall's work can be found here: <https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/persons/janet-goodall>

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