



Home and School:

promoting the wellbeing of children and young people

The links between school environment and the wellbeing of pupils are well established, and the nature of a school's interactions with parents says important things about its overall ethos.

Alongside physical health issues, such as children's diets and physical activity, schools also have a responsibility to promote mental health if they are indeed to be seen as health promoting schools. Young people's mental health can be affected temporarily by stress factors such as bereavement, trauma, parental break up or in a more chronic fashion, in the form of behaviour disorders, depression and so on. Although youngsters may internalise such problems and 'withdraw', sometimes children's mental distress can be manifest through indiscipline, truancy and anger or violence. Public concerns over school behaviour, fanned by the media tend to concentrate on disciplinary responses, with little consideration of the causes of the behaviour or the welfare of the pupils involved.

This briefing reports findings from a Scottish study (Shucksmith et al 2005) of the links between mental health and behaviour in schools, and here we concentrate on one aspect of that work: the relationship between home and school in respect of the wellbeing of children and young people.

Key points

- Parents found it helpful to be meaningfully involved with schools in promoting the wellbeing of their children
 - Many families find contact with school difficult. Inflexibility over parental involvement especially in secondary schools led many parents to complain that they were only involved if problems arose. Parents experiencing stress sometimes appeared to be suspicious of involvement with schools
 - Where school staff had good knowledge of catchment areas, understanding of social issues and familiarity with supporting agencies this helped families to view schools as a community resource. This was less likely in secondary school where it was often seen as the preserve of the guidance staff
 - There is potential for schools to reach out further into their communities through designated workers such as pupil and family support workers
 - Parents can benefit from multi-agency working, involving health workers, social workers or voluntary sector staff offering different routes to approach and work with the school, although multi agency teams were often not integrated into the school
 - Access to these services is often mediated by school staff who acted as gatekeepers and parents and pupils valued opportunities to self refer
 - Involving parents in multi-agency discussions of children's difficulties offers opportunities for parents to negotiate with schools and provides a basis for better relationships
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The study

The overall aim of the study was to examine the responses (both proactive and reactive) of schools, education authorities and their partners to challenging behaviours including disruption, withdrawal and truancy which were triggered by poor mental health. An initial scoping study involved telephone interviews with representatives of thirty education authorities, eighteen representatives of health boards and eighteen employees of voluntary sector organisations. From these interviews six examples of good or innovative practice were selected for intensive case study. The parental viewpoints referred to in this briefing arise from group interviews which took place during the case studies.

Parents' relationships with schools

The parents who took part in the study were profoundly interested in their children's education, and very concerned when their children experienced difficulties. However, many families found contact with schools was difficult, particularly with secondary schools.

Traditional arrangements for communication, such as formal parents' evenings, were viewed by parents as unsatisfactory, and they complained that any other form of interaction arose only if there were problems identified by the school, leading to discussions that were focused on the negative aspects of their children's education. Parents found these arrangements to be intimidating and it was clear that they often reinforced parents' own negative experiences of school as children. Those parents who were experiencing problems themselves found such interactions particularly daunting especially in cases where a parent's actions (e.g. marriage breakdown, drug use) might be the cause of their children's difficulties. Consequently, parents could be suspicious of the school and, in such circumstances, were unlikely to see it as a source of support.

Schools themselves were often unaware of the reasons why parents were reluctant to engage in the processes of participation on offer and expressed frustration at being unable to develop better relationships:

"When it comes to secondary school, particularly in this area our parents are reluctant. I think they feel inhibited or whatever and we've tried a variety of things over the years. It's very, very difficult to get parents involved, by and large. It's a shame, but that's the way of it."

(Deputy Head, Glasgow)

In some areas, however, schools had made efforts to involve parents in more meaningful ways and this was viewed by parents as extremely helpful. In one instance parent groups were operating, organised by the integrated community school team, for families of troubled children. Such groups allowed fuller and more contextualised discussion of pupils' difficulties, and could lead to individualised support for vulnerable young people and even families themselves. Such in-

itiatives were rare, and required additional sources of funding, which were often short term.

Linking to the community

Having a sense of the school in its catchment area, is a critical element in promoting the welfare of children and young people. Yet staff knowledge of the social issues pertaining in the area and their familiarity with the community could be limited, particularly in secondary schools where the educational priority often lies with the curriculum. In the secondary sector, social or wellbeing issues were generally seen as the principal concern of the guidance staff. The organisational structure of secondary schools leaves little scope for teachers to engage in community matters, and professionals are unlikely to live locally if the school is in a deprived area, giving little opportunity for direct involvement.

However, in some case studies the potential of schools to reach further into the community was enhanced by the employment of non teaching staff. The roles of pupil and family support workers and family learning co-ordinators in providing a non threatening link between home and school was seen as a positive development. These workers were more likely than teachers to live in the catchment area, were better placed to develop empathetic relations with parents, and had the capacity to offer more flexible responses. Proactive strategies included organisation of community activities in and around the school. This, in turn, was shown to increase parents' confidence in approaching the school in times of difficulty. Reactive strategies by these workers could include practical support for both pupils and parents. Parents spoke highly of such bridging staff, as shown by this mother's description:

"They are absolutely the best thing since sliced bread. Totally amazing. What they do is they'll come in and speak to the family. I had personal contact numbers I could phone at any time. They would come and speak to him [my son], and the family support worker would take him for a wee walk, and she would say to him "How do you feel about this, why's this been happening?" and little by little the behaviour started to disappear."

(Parent of a secondary pupil)

However, the expertise and local knowledge built up by these workers was not readily communicated to the teaching staff, and may have had little impact on the ethos of the wider school. Moreover, issues of status often left these workers isolated and therefore unable to share their insights in any meaningful way, other than with their line manager.

Multi-agency working

Some of the best examples in the study of positive interventions for children's mental wellbeing in our study were seen in well established integrated community schools, although these are still the exception rather than the norm in Scotland. The presence of workers from other agencies such as health, social work, voluntary

sector organisations and community education could considerably increase the capacity of the school to respond to issues associated with the mental wellbeing of pupils.

In general, however, the multi-agency teams were not well integrated into the main body of the school. They tended to form good relations with guidance and some senior management, but had less impact on the teaching staff, whose awareness of mental health issues was largely unaltered and whose practice was unchanged by their presence. The significance of this was not lost on parents, as shown in this comment:

“You can come in from outside and do stuff, but at the end of the day it is the teachers who are there with them and if they are not really seeing what is needing to happen, it’s a problem.”

(Parent of a secondary pupil)

Inter-agency teams may offer innovative ways through which parents can work with the school, either by acting as mediator, or by working directly with the family. Relationships could be significantly improved in this way, as shown in this case:

“I think it has been more of a partnership between me and the [inter-agency] team, because there was a time... that I was getting letters, letters, letters and I couldn’t cope with this. And that was the time the [inter-agency] team stepped in.”

(Parent of a secondary pupil)

Very often, access to these workers was mediated by the school, and parents who sought professional advice needed to first convince a member of the school management of the authenticity of their case before being referred onwards. Self referral opportunities for children and young people were rare.

In one school area, the multi-agency team was based close to, but not within the school, and this allowed parents to access services independently. The same team also operated informal “drop in” services to pupils on the school premises at lunch time. Offering a range of gateways into the services increased the opportunities for parents to report difficulties and seek support.

Parental participation

Parental participation is not purely about access to services and the opportunity to report problems, it is also about the role that parents play in diagnosing, discussing and determining the response to their child’s difficulties. Schools were often defensive about involving parents in this process, often because the parents were construed as part of the problem, but also because parents who have a history of poor relations with school can sometimes resort to “storming” behaviour as their only means of expression, as described by Ranson et al (2004), giving rise to scenes which schools find uncomfortable. For their part, parents reported feeling inhibited by meetings of professionals, unfamiliar with the language and norms of such occasions.

Nonetheless, parents have an important role in supporting their children through difficulties and can offer unique insights to the causes and manifestations of difficulties. The practice, therefore, of a number of local authorities of excluding parents from interdisciplinary team meetings (JST or JAT meetings) at which their children are discussed, and courses of action determined, seems to be sharply at odds with the practices of health and social services where parental rights to participation are viewed as fundamental. In cases where parents were included in these meetings, the opportunities to mediate with the school were valued and provided the basis for improved relationships.

Conclusions

Relationships with the families and the wider community in which the school is located are often one of the most underdeveloped aspects of a school’s ethos. Whilst schools do communicate with parents in predictable and formalised patterns, true partnership with parents is a rarity. Most attempts to draw parents into closer contact with schools are initiated and managed by the schools, and are controlling rather than liberating (Vincent and Tomlinson 1997). Much of the communication between school assumes middle class values in relation to education and child care practices. Ouellette et al (2004) report that parents often feel they are not listened to or that ‘schools are condescending’. Parents may also feel that ‘communication between parents and schools are for problems regarding their children’ (Ouellette et al 2004:304).

The school’s notion of partnership can be one-sided, with a lack of recognition that parents may hold different educational values or have different goals for their child’s education (Hoover-Dempsey et al 2002).

“If parents are to be genuine partners in their children’s education then they must be able to share power, responsibility and ownership in ways which show a high degree of mutuality. This becomes problematic if parental knowledge about schools and schools’ knowledge about parents is characterised by lack of understanding.”

Tett (2001:194)

This requires movement away from a perspective of parents as ‘problems’ to recognising the important contribution that parents can make to the home-school relationship.

Implications for policy and practice

- Non-teaching workers such as pupil and family support workers, or other professional groups such as social workers or community educators, can be very effective in developing meaningful and sustainable relationships with families. These relationships can be built up proactively through community activities before problems emerge, or reactively, in response to difficulties.
- The presence of inter-agency workers in schools can increase the capacity of schools to work with

troubled children and young people, and their families. Ways of working should be examined which increase the communication and understanding of the different groups of workers, so that all staff are better able to respond to pupils experiencing difficulties. Successful integration of multi-agency staff into whole school life and practice requires strategic commitment from the school leadership, linked to a well planned programme of staff training.

- Schools and local authorities should develop partnership with parents that engages the latter at all points in the process of working with children experiencing mental health difficulties. Direct access to services, active participation in discussion, decision-making and in the remediation process should all be developed further.

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The study

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