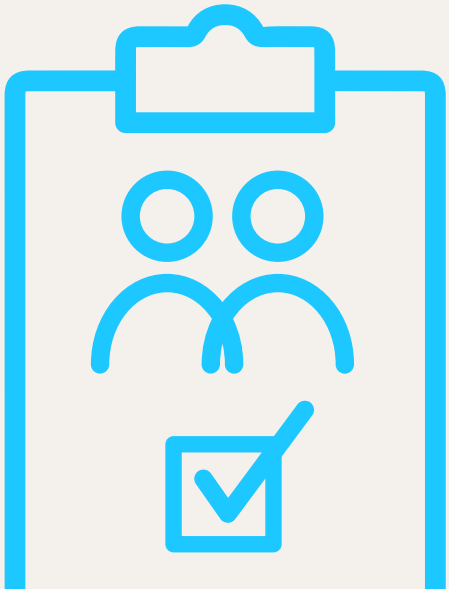
EVIDENCE FOR LEARNING

Guidance Report

All year levels

Working with parents to support children's learning



This Guidance Report is based on original content from a report of the same name produced by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The original content has been modified where appropriate for the Australian context.

The authors of the original Guidance Report are Dr Matthew can Poortvliet (EEF), Nick Axford (University of Plymouth), Dr Jenny Lloyd (University of Exeter). They were supported by an Advisory Panel and Evidence Review Team, outlined in the 'How was this guide compiled?' section.

Australian content for this Guidance Report was written by Danielle Toon, Matthew Deeble and Susannah Schoeffel (Evidence for Learning).

Evidence for Learning thanks the Australian researchers and practitioners who provided input to and feedback on drafts of this Guidance Report. We acknowledge the expertise and advice of Barbara Barker, Penny Dakin and Diana Harris of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

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Foreword

Parents* form an integral part of school communities across Australia. They play diverse and significant roles, and while the evidence is still emerging in Australia, there is a growing understanding of the important part that parents play in the academic achievement of their child. In particular, the importance of parental expectation as a predictor for student achievement is laid out. Beyond academic achievement, the impact of the home and parental involvement on a student's wellbeing and social development is well documented.[1]

With this understanding, schools can adopt a proactive stance on engaging parents to ensure all students are supported to learn at home and school. For teachers at all career stages, and for school leaders, engaging with parents and community is an important part of professional practice.[2,3]

We appreciate that some families face additional barriers to being engaged with their child's school. Families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students whose families speak a language other than English, or parents who have had negative experiences of school as students, may require personalised support to help get them through the gates.[4]

The four recommendations that are outlined in this Guidance Report are written with the underlying knowledge that relationships and trust are foundations that cannot be overlooked. A schools ability to engage parents in their child's learning will likely be determined by the strength of these relationships.

In response to the promise of parental engagement, we have created this Guidance Report. Developed by our UK partner, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), and updated for Australian audiences, it offers four practical evidence-based recommendations which are relevant to school leaders and teachers. To develop the recommendations, the EEF reviewed the best available international research and consulted with experts to understand how schools can work with parents to support children's learning. To confirm the relevance of these concepts to Australian schools, the Evidence for Learning team consulted with experts and drew on evidence summaries relating to Australian schooling and early childhood education. As the research specific to Australia has not yet focused on the relationship between parent engagement and student achievement, we rely on the international experience to inform our understanding.[5]

There are many organisations and groups endeavouring to support the development of partnerships between schools and families to foster parental engagement.** We hope that you will appreciate our contribution to the shared endeavour of helping schools work with parents to improve student outcomes across Australia.

The Evidence for Learning team

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* Throughout this report, wherever we refer to parents we mean parents and carers, or families, including, for example, grandparents and older siblings when they have significant caring responsibilities for children. We intend parents to be an inclusive term to encompass the significant variation in family structures.

** We differentiate parental engagement and parental involvement in line with the definitions outlined by the Australian Government Department of Education.[6] Parent involvement in schools includes attending events, volunteering in class or other activities, and serving on school councils and parent committees. Parent engagement in learning encompasses parent involvement in schooling as well as a broader range of activities, including parent support for children's learning at home, at school and in community contexts.

Introduction

What is this guide for?

This Guidance Report aims to help schools consider how they can work with parents to improve children's learning. Schools work with parents in many ways and with a range of aims, for example, to involve parents in school decision-making and to develop relationships of trust and respect between school and home. In this report, we focus mostly on activities that aim to directly improve children's learning. So, when we refer to 'parental engagement' we mean 'schools working with parents to improve children's academic outcomes'.

This Guidance Report draws on a recent review of the evidence on parental engagement in children's learning undertaken by our UK partner, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).[7] It is not a new study in itself but rather is intended as an accessible overview of existing global research with clear, actionable guidance. The report also draws on a wider body of evidence and expert input.

Relative to other areas in which Evidence for Learning has produced guidance to date, for example related to Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants, there is, as yet, less rigorous evidence for what constitutes effective parental engagement in children's learning, so the over-arching message for schools is to plan and monitor work in this area carefully.

In addition to the evidence review, the EEF commissioned a survey of what schools in England are currently doing to engage parents in children's learning. This information is used to provide context for the recommendations, and to identify where there are gaps between current practice and the evidence.

More information is provided in the 'How was this guidance compiled?' section.

Who is this guide for?

This guidance is applicable to primary and secondary schools, and there are some lessons to be drawn for those working with younger children. It is aimed primarily at senior leaders who are thinking about their school's approach to engaging parents. It may also be useful for classroom teachers. Further audiences who may find the guidance relevant include early childhood educators, school councils, parents, program developers, family support workers, and educational researchers.

Using this guide

The section 'Acting on the evidence', suggests a range of strategies and tools that you might find helpful in planning, structuring and delivering a whole-school approach to improving parental engagement.

Additional Evidence for Learning resources to support the implementation of the recommendations made in this report will be developed. As well as these resources, Evidence for Learning will be releasing other subject-specific Guidance Reports to support the implementation of specific recommendations. For example, Guidance Reports on literacy, maths, and science can be used in conjunction with this report to support students' attainment in these subjects. Evidence for Learning's more general guidance, such as Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation, can also support teachers and school leaders to apply the recommendations in a practical way in their schools.[8]

School leaders and teachers are encouraged to think about this Guidance Report in line with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) professional standards which are outlined in the 'Further reading' section.

Summary of recommendations

1

Critically review how you work with parents

Schools should be optimistic about the potential of working with parents

- There is an established link between the home learning environment at all ages and children's performance at school.
- Schools and parents have a shared priority to deliver the best outcomes for their children.

However, evidence on effective strategies that schools can use to engage parents in their children's learning is mixed

- If the aim is solely to improve academic outcomes, classroom interventions working directly with children currently have more evidence of effectiveness at improving learning than parenting interventions with the same aim.
- Working effectively with parents can be challenging and is likely to require sustained effort and support.
- Survey results from the UK have shown that most schools say that they do not have an explicit plan for how they work with parents, and fewer than 10% of teachers have undertaken professional learning (PL) on parental engagement.

Schools should start by critically reviewing their aims and current approaches

- Focus on areas that have better evidence (such as those summarised in the following recommendations) – different approaches are needed for different ages.
- Talk to parents about what support they would find helpful, ensuring the voices heard represent the diversity of the community.
- Plan and monitor progress towards defined aims.

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2

Provide practical strategies to support learning at home

- For young children, promoting shared book reading should be a central component of any parental engagement approach. Home learning activities, such as playing with letters and numbers, are also linked to improved outcomes.
- Tips, support, and resources can make home activities more effective—for example, where they prompt longer and more frequent conversations during book reading.
- Book-gifting alone is unlikely to be effective, but carefully selected books plus advice and support can be beneficial for supporting reading.
- Support parents to create a regular routine and encourage good homework habits, but be cautious about promoting direct parental assistance with homework (particularly for older children).
- Parents can support their children by encouraging them to set goals, plan, and manage their time, effort, and emotions. This type of support can help children to regulate their own learning and will often be more valuable than direct help with homework tasks.
- Consider initiatives to encourage summer reading; these have some promise but are not widely used at present.

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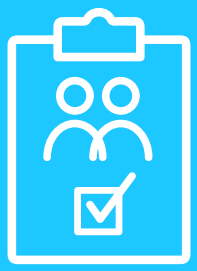

3

Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning

- Well-designed school communications can be effective for improving attainment and a range of other outcomes, such as attendance.
- Examples include weekly texts sent from school to parents, and short, termly letters.
- Impacts from such approaches may appear small but they are generally low cost, and straightforward to introduce.
- Messages are likely to be more effective if they are personalised, linked to learning, and promote positive interactions by, for example, celebrating success.
- Communication should be two-way: consulting with parents about how they can be involved is likely to be valuable and increase the effectiveness of home-school relationships.
- School communications may be particularly important for engaging some parents/carers who could play an important role but may have less contact with school.

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4

Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed

- Start by assessing needs and talking to parents about what would help them support learning: targeting is likely to be needed to use resources effectively and avoid widening gaps.
- Communicate carefully to avoid stigmatising, blaming, or discouraging parents. Focus on building parents' efficacy – that they are equal partners and can make a difference.
- Encourage a consistent approach to behaviour between parents and the school, for example, by sharing expectations with parents.
- Offering more structured, evidence-based programs can help to develop positive behaviour and consistency where needs are greater.
- Plan carefully for group-based parenting initiatives (such as regular workshops). A convenient time and location, face-to-face recruitment, trusting relationships, and an informal, welcoming environment are the most important factors for parents to attend group sessions.
- Consider offering regular home visits for younger children with greater needs. This can be an effective approach for parents that struggle to attend meetings, and for building relationships.

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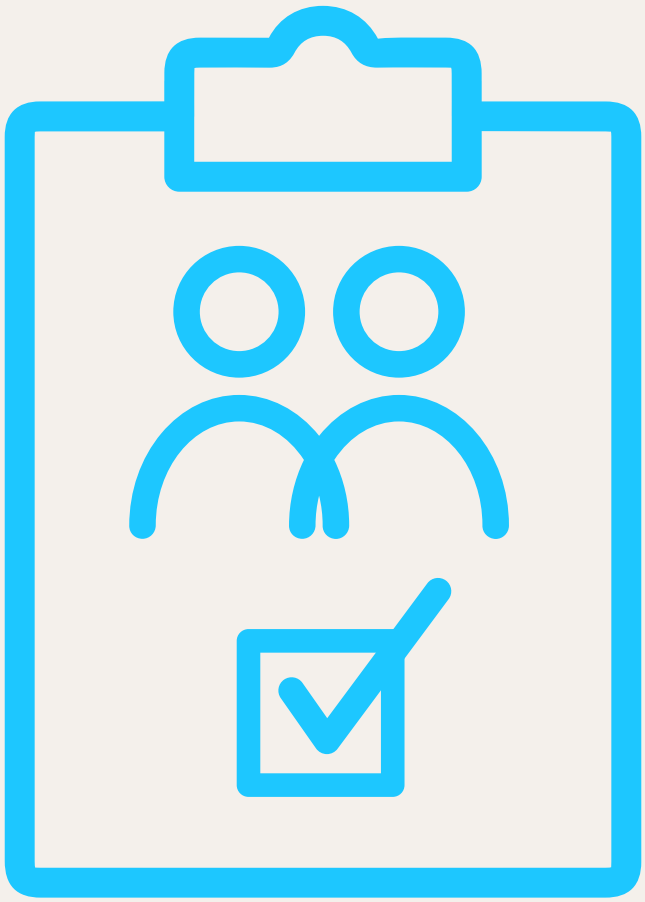
1

Critically review how you work with parents



1 Critically review how you work with parents

Parents' involvement in their children's learning is consistently associated with positive outcomes for children of all age groups but it can be challenging for schools to influence this effectively. The evidence for what schools can do to effectively engage parents in a way that improves children's learning outcomes is limited, particularly for older children. Therefore, schools should be optimistic about the potential of parental engagement, but cautious about the best approaches – reviewing and monitoring their activities to check that they are having their intended impacts. Schools should expect that parent engagement will look different from school to school and will depend on the age of students, so it is important to determine what works in your context.

Consider the promise and challenges

Parental engagement in children's learning and the quality of the home learning environment are associated with improved academic outcomes at all ages.[9,10] The evidence suggests that three areas are particularly worth focusing on:

- supporting parents to have high academic expectations for their children;
- developing and maintaining communication with parents about school activities and schoolwork; and
- promoting the development of reading habits.[9]

That said, the current evidence is weaker on how schools can influence what parents do in a way that improves children's learning.[11] There are surprisingly few high-quality evaluations demonstrating impacts of parental engagement interventions on children's attainment, and many of the more rigorous studies show mixed results. Classroom interventions working directly with children currently have more evidence of effectiveness at improving learning than parenting interventions with the same aim.[12]

The evidence available also suggests that delivering parental engagement initiatives effectively can be challenging, partly due to demands made on parents' time. Schools therefore need to plan, support, and monitor how they work with parents particularly carefully.

Focus on the skills you want children to develop at different ages

The strategies for parental engagement will be different for different age groups. While the overall evidence on parental engagement in learning is mixed, there is better evidence that particular skills are important for children to develop at different ages and stages, so it makes sense to target those. For example, skills that can be practised and developed in the home include:

- in the early years, activities that develop oral language and self-regulation;
- in early primary, activities that target reading (for example, letter sounds, word reading, and spellings) and numeracy (such as learning numbers or learning the count sequence);
- in later primary, activities that support reading comprehension through shared book reading; and
- in secondary school, independent reading and strategies that support independent learning.

In 2020, Evidence for Learning will be releasing Guidance Reports on literacy, maths, and metacognition and self-regulated learning for effective strategies in these areas.

1 Critically review how you work with parents

Review and plan

In approaching parental engagement, schools can start by:

- developing a clear plan for what you want to achieve;
- auditing your current practice to assess what is working well and what is not;
- listening to what parents would find helpful, ensuring the voices heard represent the diversity of the community; and
- stopping activities without clear benefits.

It is important to talk to parents so that any plan is informed by an understanding of families' lives and what facilitates or impedes their support for their children's learning. By doing this you will, in your own school and context, have a clear starting point from which to move forward. It is also important to be clear about which activities are intended to support children's learning directly and which have other goals – for example, increasing attendance, being proactive about safeguarding, or building trust and respect between school and home. Parental involvement with the school – such as attending events – is a stepping-stone to parental engagement in learning but it is not enough to improve learning outcomes on its own.

A written plan or strategy may be needed to turn parental engagement from something that is peripheral to school improvement into something that is central to an intentional change in culture. The plan does not necessarily need to be extensive or detailed. It may not mean 'doing more'; it may result in the school doing fewer but more focused activities. It may also identify opportunities for working with partners (for example, family learning providers within your local council or state, or not-for-profit organisations that provide family support) that introduce additional support at minimal time and cost to the school. Include evaluation in your plan: what is the current picture (the baseline); how will you know if the changes are having the impact you want?

Research on the factors affecting parental engagement with school suggests the need for a whole-school approach that is embedded over the long term.[13,14] Effective partnership with parents is likely to be supported by several ingredients at the school level, including a leader who prioritises it and ensures that it is integrated into school planning, and a plan for working with parents that is informed by an understanding of families' lives.

Support

According to recent surveys of schools in England, the majority (80%) of school leaders believe that engaging parents is the responsibility of all staff,[7] and almost all teachers believe that parental engagement has a positive impact on their school.[15] However, relatively few (28%) school leaders report that they currently provide staff with any training about how to engage parents or have a plan for how they would like staff to work with parents.[7] Interviews with school leaders highlight the difficulty of engaging so-called 'hard-to-reach' families and suggest that there is an assumption that teachers know how to engage parents and families effectively.[7] Fewer than 10% of teachers in England say that they have received training on parental engagement.[15] While many Australian schools collect their own data around parent engagement, teacher perceptions and the focus of training, this isn't yet published on a national scale. An OECD report on teacher-reported areas of need in professional learning (PL), does not feature parental engagement as a focus for Australian educators.[16] A number of private providers, not-for-profit organisations and Education departments in Australia have dedicated PL for teachers in the area of parental and family engagement, but the number of teachers accessing this is not clear.

Your plan for how your school works with parents needs to address the support, resources, and time required for all the staff who are involved, whether classroom teachers, receptionists, teaching assistants, or parent support workers. This may include:

- having a clear expectation of what is, and is not, expected of different staff members in relation to parent engagement and communication, and ensuring corresponding amounts of time are available;
- being clear about how parental engagement is intended to contribute towards overall school improvement priorities so that all staff understand the potential benefits for both the school and students;
- ensuring an understanding of both the barriers to parental engagement and the strategies to address these (see Recommendation 4) – this is likely to require explicit training and follow-on support; and
- providing leadership support and training for individual staff members where parental engagement becomes challenging or difficult.

Monitor

Given the limitations of the current evidence base, it is especially important that schools monitor and regularly review whether their approaches are having their intended impact. Monitoring does not need to be onerous. It could, for example, include reviewing whether particular groups of parents find communications from school helpful, whether they attend parent meetings, or feel they have a voice in the decision-making process. Ultimately, monitoring should aim to assess whether learning outcomes are improving as a result of parental engagement activities. This monitoring might lead to reviewing your approach, stopping certain activities if they are failing to engage parents, or embedding and extending activities found to be successful.

2

Provide practical strategies to support learning at home

2 Provide practical strategies to support learning at home

Schools can support parents with practical guidance and encouragement about the types of things they can do at home to improve learning outcomes. The focus of, and strategies for, parental engagement will be different for different age groups. When children are younger this can consist of shared activities such as reading together or practising letters and numbers; it may include fostering other elements of a positive home learning environment such as ensuring that there are learning resources such as books, puzzles, and toys.[17] As children get older, parental encouragement for, and interest in, their children's learning are more important than direct involvement. Providing general information on child development or curriculum content can provide helpful context, but is not sufficient unless it is linked to specific actions that parents can take to support learning.

Supporting early language and literacy

For young children, promoting shared reading should be a central component of working with parents as a way of supporting oral language development and early literacy. Most schools already encourage parents to read with their children in some way, but additional tips, support, and resources can make home reading more effective. Helping parents to read in a more interactive way and prompting longer and more frequent conversations with their children are particularly important; the parent–child interactions that take place during shared reading are thought to be the key ingredient to their success.[18]

Shared reading is an important strategy from a very early age and continues to be so as children start to develop independent reading skills.[11] Parents can support their children in a variety of ways, for example by asking questions or by linking the topic of the book to real-life examples (see Box 1).[19] Using everyday activities to reinforce literacy is important too. For example, schools can encourage parents of younger children to look out for 'environmental print' with their children – looking for letters and numbers in street names and shop signs, or asking children to look at food labels when out shopping. The ORIM framework can help schools and parents identify practical ways of supporting children's development in literacy and other areas by highlighting the importance of:

- Opportunities – for example, books or other print materials;
- Recognition – praise and attention when children take part;
- Interactions – sharing and working on activities together; and
- Modelling – demonstrating a skill.[20]

Box 1: Shared reading tips

Tip 1: Ask questions about the book

- Parents can support their child by asking a range of questions about the book they are reading together.

The 'five Ws' – who, what, where, when, and why – can provide useful questions for parents.

- Parents should use a mixture of closed questions (which can be answered with a single word) and open questions (which require a fuller response).
- Children might also be asked to *summarise* what has happened in the book or story so far, and to *predict* what will happen next.

Tip 2: Link reading to the real world

- By talking about links between the book and real life, parents can make the story more interesting and help children develop their understanding of ideas in the book. For example, while reading about Cinderella going the ball, a parent might discuss the similarities between a ball and a birthday party.

As children get older, it becomes important for parents to listen to their children read. The strategy of 'pause, prompt, praise' may help parents when listening to children read: *pausing* to let them work out words if they get stuck, providing a *prompt* or 'clue' to help (but not giving the answer), and *praising* them when they concentrate and problem-solve.[21] Engaging in high quality talk about the story remains important for fostering reading comprehension skills.

Interventions can be effective to introduce home reading strategies to parents and support regular use. Not all such programs are equally effective so they need to be selected, supported, and monitored carefully.[22] For example, book-gifting is unlikely to be effective on its own.[23,24] But providing more structured support, ideas, and activities with carefully chosen books can been effective.[25] Such approaches do not necessarily require regular or intensive attendance at courses or workshops if they provide comprehensive instructional materials and resources. For example, Parents and Children Together (PACT) provides families with storybooks, scripted teaching activities, and visual resources, and encourages parents of preschool children to spend 20 minutes a day on shared reading and fun activities that promote oral language development (see Box 2). A randomised controlled trial of the approach in the U.K., involving children aged three and their parents living in socially disadvantaged areas, found positive effects on literacy and language outcomes which were still evident six months after the program had ended. A number of similar programs exist in Australia, however independent evaluation reports on these programs are not yet available.

Box 2: Parents and Children Together (PACT)[26]

PACT is an early language program for parents to deliver to their preschool child (aged 3–4 years). Parents are provided with storybooks and structured activities and deliver the program to their child at home every day for 20 minutes (five sessions per week) over 30 weeks. PACT incorporates three key components designed to promote children's oral language development:

1. shared reading – parents read books with their child using strategies which support verbal interaction and active engagement;
2. vocabulary instruction – selected words are taught using interactive activities to promote understanding and production; and
3. narrative (storytelling) – activities include sequencing, summarising, and telling/ retelling stories.

A randomised controlled trial of the approach in 22 children's centres found positive impacts on language and narrative at the end of the program, and positive effects on language and emergent literacy at six-month follow-up (though not on narrative). The limited burden on parents to attend sessions, attractive offer of books and resources, and clearly scripted activities to use at home appeared to be key to its popularity with parents. The approach is now being tested on a larger scale by a team from the University of Manchester.

If programs focus on children with particular needs (such as struggling readers), they need to be carefully targeted and supported (see Recommendation 4).

Homework

Children who regularly complete homework have better school outcomes than children who do not. This association is stronger at secondary school than primary school, where the evidence base is also more secure.[27,28] Homework has a number of potential benefits including consolidation of what has been learned in lessons, preparation for subsequent lessons and tests, and the development of independent learning skills. (Evidence for Learning will be releasing a further report, Metacognition and self-regulated Learning in 2019, containing more information on strategies that support independent learning, such as spaced practice and elaboration).

At primary level, the evidence is strongest for short and focused homework projects. At secondary level, studies indicate that there is an optimum amount of homework of between one and two hours per school day (slightly longer for older students), with effects diminishing as the time that students spend on homework increases beyond this point. At all stages, however, the quality of the homework completed is more important that the absolute quantity. Schools can improve the quality of homework by ensuring that homework tasks are tightly tied to main class teaching, and that students receive high quality feedback on their work. See Evidence for Learning's summaries on Homework in the *Teaching & Learning Toolkit*[27,28] for more information.

Parents can have a positive effect on homework completion and help children to develop effective learning habits. However, *how* parents support homework is important. The evidence suggests that schools should encourage parents to know about homework and support their children to do it rather than get directly involved in the actual assignments.[29]

Creating a daily homework routine that is clearly communicated to children and reinforced with praise and rewards can increase the amount of time spent on homework and improve the effectiveness of how that time is spent. In addition, it is possible that this approach will have long-term benefits as children learn to develop good habits and regulate their own behaviour. As with home leaning more widely, parental support for homework can promote the self-regulation in children necessary to achieve academic goals including goal-setting, planning, perseverance, and the management of time, materials, attentiveness, and emotions.[30] It is likely to be these capabilities – rather than direct involvement in the academic content – that parents can most usefully support.

While encouraging parents to become directly involved in homework might appear attractive, schools should consider whether parents have the knowledge and skills to provide the right support, particularly at secondary level. Interventions designed to engage parents in homework have generally not been linked to increased attainment. Students who are struggling academically may be more likely to request parental assistance with homework, but parents may be unfamiliar with the most effective teaching methods. As a consequence, it may be more effective to encourage parents to redirect struggling student to their teachers rather than to take on an instructional role.

Box 3: Tips for effective homework (and how parents can help)

- Quality matters more than quantity
- Tasks should be linked closely to main class teaching
- Provide timely and specific feedback
- Be cautious about encouraging direct parental involvement in homework tasks (especially for older children)

Parents can help by:

- encouraging a regular routine, and good study habits
- knowing about homework, showing interest and encouragement

Summer reading

The decline in children's reading development that can occur during summer holiday times when children are not in the classroom – particularly for children from low-income families – is well-documented.[31] Parents supporting summer reading could be an effective approach. This is not widely used in the U.K., according to schools surveyed, but has some promise from international studies.[32]

The Summer Reading Club[33], led by the State Library of Queensland, is one such program operating in Australia, aiming to address the summer 'slide'. Supported by over 1,000 Australian libraries, the Summer Reading Club provides programs for parents and children both online and in library spaces, to encourage recreational reading over the summer break.

In the U.K., the Summer Active Reading Program focused on supporting reading at the transition to secondary school. In this project, children not achieving at the expected level in reading for their age (except for those with serious difficulties) were given four book packs and invited to attend two summer events to support reading at their new secondary school. A trial of this approach commissioned by the EEF showed some initial evidence of promise on reading outcomes: children in the program made two months' additional progress in reading comprehension at the start of secondary school compared to children in a control group.[25] However, the evaluation also found that engaging all schools fully and securing parental engagement was challenging.

This trial, and the wider literature, suggests the approach may be particularly beneficial for disadvantaged children who are most at risk of falling behind in the summer. Such approaches may need to run over several summers, and require inputs from teachers prior to, or during, the summer break to be most effective – for example, to help match the right books to a child's reading level and encourage parental support for home literacy. Texting parents over the summer to remind them of the activities may also be beneficial in supporting these programs (see Recommendation 3).[34]

3

Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning

3 Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning

For all age groups, well-designed school communications with parents can be effective for improving attainment and a range of other outcomes, such as attendance.[35] Regular attendance is linked to improved academic attainment and is an area where parental input can be particularly influential at secondary school. School communications are also important for raising interest and engagement in more structured activities (see Recommendation 4) or for providing practical ideas for learning at home (see Recommendation 2).

Be positive, personalise, and link to learning

School communications with parents are likely to be more effective if they are personalised, linked to learning, and framed positively (for example, celebrating success). There are several evaluations of programs using text messaging to prompt conversations about learning at home and provide parents with tips or information about children's learning. In most cases, these involve weekly texts sent from school to parents, although the insights from these approaches could be applied to other forms of communication.

If there are important messages for parents who are harder to reach, face-to-face conversations, phone calls, or text messages are likely to be more effective than generic emails or letters home. In one example, advertising a program for parents by sending flyers home with children was not successful: letters to 3,740 families resulted in 18 parents (0.5%) signing up.[36] Although the costs and time commitments of creating personalised communications may be higher, these are likely to be less than the costs of running a course with very low attendance or without the parents schools most want to reach.

The impacts on children's learning outcomes from approaches such as texting parents are likely to be smaller than those from more intensive programs, and will not be sufficient on their own for supporting children with greater needs. But the evidence is promising; they are typically low-cost, and they are straightforward to introduce.

The age of learners affects the nature of the messages

In the early years and primary school, there should be a greater focus on activities that parents and children can do together. Messages might focus on facts or tips, or on example activities and games that children and parents can play together:

- **facts** highlighting the importance of particular skills – for example, 'When children count objects one-by-one, they learn that we count to find out 'how many'. This is a big step towards learning harder maths skills';
- **tips** for short and simple activities or games for parents to do with their children – 'As you do the laundry, count the socks one-by-one with your child. When you're done, ask, '*How many socks did we put in the wash?*"; and
- **support** texts to provide encouragement and reinforcement – 'Keep counting everyday objects. Now see if your child can count the socks all on their own as you put them away.'[37]

In secondary school, the evidence is strongest for providing parents with more factual information related to children's progress (such as homework completion and grades) and upcoming tasks (such as tests).[38] Providing prompts for a conversation about what the child is learning could be beneficial. However, it is important not to send parents difficult curriculum-related content that they do not know how to respond to. 'Can you talk to your child about thermal decomposition?' is too hard to access, whereas a message about study tips (for example, the importance of revising for an upcoming test, making a revision plan, or working with your phone off) could be more effective.

Box 4: Text-messaging is a promising approach

A texting program was trialled in UK secondary schools involving 15,000 students. Parents received weekly messages over the course of a year (30 texts in total). Texts informed parents about dates of upcoming tests, whether homework was submitted on time, and what their children were learning at school. Children whose parents received texts made one month's additional progress in maths and had reduced absenteeism. The mechanism for the impact is thought to be improved communications between parents and children: parents receiving the texts were nearly three times more likely than those in the control condition to talk to their child about revising for an upcoming test.[38]

Consider frequency, timing, and audience

Although texting approaches are generally low cost and straightforward to introduce, careful thought needs to be given to the frequency, timing, and targeting of messages. Weekly messages over six to eight months appear to be effective, though more frequent and shorter approaches have also had positive results, particularly in the early years.

Parents are generally accepting of texting programs, including the content, frequency, and timing of texts. However, there is such a thing as 'too many texts'.[35] It may help to first provide samples and gather feedback on what parents find helpful, and monitor perceptions carefully to avoid overloading or irritating parents with messages. Schools could chart how many messages are already going out to parents and ensure that additional communications do not become too frequent.

There is some evidence that it is beneficial to involve other family members – not just the primary contact.[34] Some groups may also benefit particularly; for example, one study found that text messaging had particularly positive effects on engaging fathers.[39] This is important given that fathers often have less contact with school but play an important role in supporting their children's learning.[40]

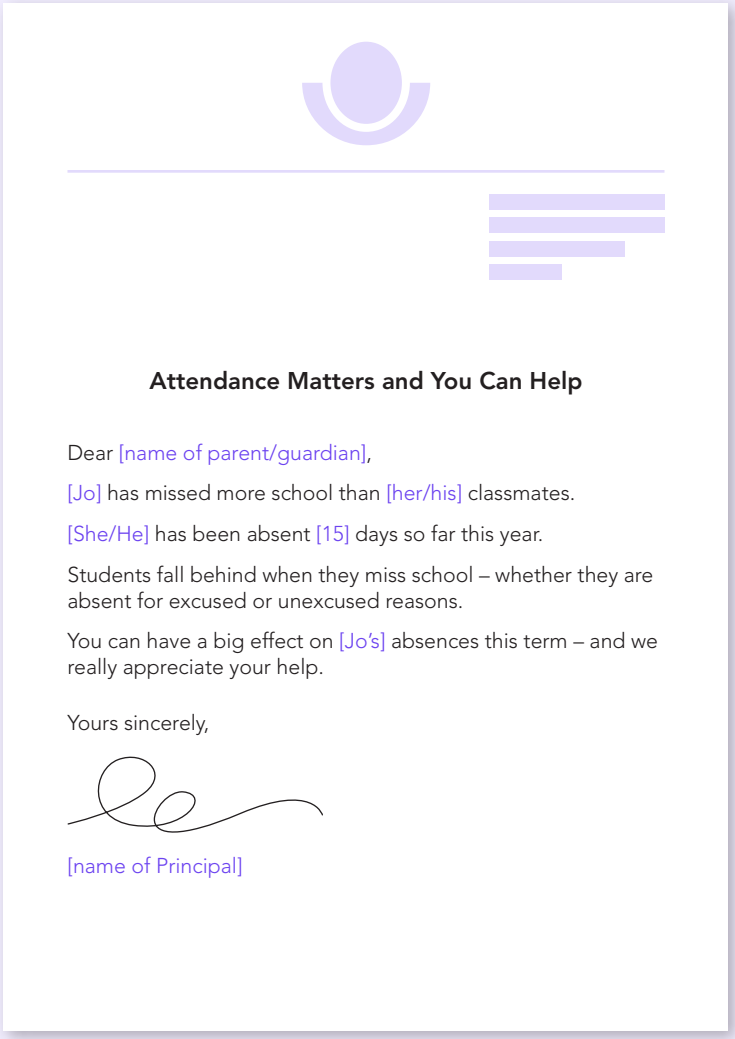
Small changes matter

Carefully designed school communications can have a positive impact on parents' beliefs and behaviours. For example, most parents underestimate the number of days their child has been absent from school and act differently when given accurate information. In one study, 72% of parents with higher-than-average-absence students did not know that their children had missed more school than their classmates.[41] When informed of their child's total absences, they made extra efforts to improve attendance. One way that schools can support this is with simple letters to parents with above-average absences stating the total number of days that their child has missed that year, framed in a way that encourages parents to support attendance (see Box 5).

Box 5: The value of personalised communications

In a randomised controlled trial in 203 American schools, sending a letter to parents stating the total number of days their child had been absent led to an average reduction in absences of one day per child (versus no letter).[41] The study showed that the wording of the letter matters: a simple reminder of the importance of attendance helps a little, but the crucial piece of information was personalising the letter to give the total number of absences to date.

Parents in the study received an average of four letters over the course of the year. There was some evidence that further reminders would have been beneficial: attendance improved directly in the period after the letter before falling back again. The letter can be very simple (fewer than 50 words) and should aim to promote parents' efficacy ('attendance is something you can help with') rather than blaming them.



Attendance Matters and You Can Help

Dear [name of parent/guardian],

[Jo] has missed more school than [her/his] classmates.

[She/He] has been absent [15] days so far this year.

Students fall behind when they miss school – whether they are absent for excused or unexcused reasons.

You can have a big effect on [Jo's] absences this term – and we really appreciate your help.

Yours sincerely,

[name of Principal]

Overcomplicated sets of instructions or activities that require more complex effort or organisation on the part of parents are less likely to have the desired effect.

Review existing communication approaches

Schools should consider whether their current forms of communication (particularly traditional methods such as newsletters, parent evenings, or information on website) are effective at reaching all parents, and could be replaced or supplemented with alternative approaches. It is worth noting, though, that while some communications may not have much bearing directly on outcomes, they may still be important in helping parents and families feel a sense of belonging or stay informed – and this may be an important precondition for messages more focused on children's learning.

Communication should be two-way, including asking parents what they would find helpful in supporting their children's learning. According to a survey of over 1,000 parents in England:[42]

- parents' happiness with how schools engage them is higher if (a) they have been consulted, (b) schools respond to their preferences, (c) more topics of information are provided by schools, and (d) when more engagement opportunities are available;
- around half of parents say that they have not been consulted on their preferences for receiving information;
- the information that parents most want from schools is updates on their child's progress, and most schools do provide this to parents; and
- after this, though, there is a mismatch between what parents say they want (information about what their child is learning), and what they tend to receive (information on general school activities, changes to school policies, administrative issues, and school performance).

While equivalent research is not available for Australia, schools are encouraged to use survey tools to understand what parents would find helpful. This may be done through sampling small groups of parents – ensuring a cross section is represented, or by using the information provided by jurisdiction designed surveys where the response rate will provide reliable evidence. More informal interactions between parents and school staff can also provide valuable insight into the needs of families while building trust.

In reviewing your approach to communications, questions for your school to consider include:

- Do you know how your parents view the school's communication with them (for example, frequency, content, mode)?
- Does it give them the information they want?
- Are there any time-consuming communications that you currently use? Are these having the desired impact? Are you reaching the parents you want to?
- What do you do for parents who do not speak English or read well?
- What channels do parents have for contacting the school?

4

Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed

4 Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed

More sustained and intensive approaches to support parental engagement may be needed for some children – for example, those struggling with early reading, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those with behavioural difficulties. More intensive approaches, which target particular families or outcomes, are associated with larger learning gains, but are also more difficult to implement.

Target support sensitively

Some form of targeting is usually required to use resources effectively and to avoid widening gaps, so an analysis of needs is a logical starting point. It is also important that targeting is done sensitively to avoid stigmatising, blaming, or discouraging parents. One approach is to provide a universal offer, but give extra support and encouragement to those parents with greater needs so that they are most likely to take up the opportunity (see Box 6 for an example).

Box 6: Careful targeting – encouraging parents to use free breakfast clubs

Children are more likely to learn effectively when they have had a healthy breakfast. Encouraging parents to provide this at home is one option; another is to provide a breakfast club in school. The EEF's trial of Magic Breakfast in 106 schools found that providing a universal free breakfast club had an impact of two additional months' progress on children's outcomes in the first two years of primary school.

On targeting the Magic Breakfast offer, teachers in this trial said:

- It is key to avoid any feeling among children and parents that the breakfast offer at school is 'just for the poorer families'.
- Encouraging children from all backgrounds to eat breakfast is a good way of removing any stigma.
- Children most likely to benefit should be sensitively targeted through personal contact with parents, sending personalised letters, and proactive efforts to get children into school on time.

Where this approach was adopted, parents described feeling that staff cared about them and recognised some of the individual challenges that they faced. In addition to having an impact on students, the classroom, and schools, parents spoke about benefits of the breakfast club, such as having less stress in the morning and fewer arguments with their children over breakfast.

Within Australia, breakfast clubs are an important offering for many schools and show variety of positive outcomes, demonstrating strong benefits for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.[43]

Where programs are intended to benefit those with particular needs (such as struggling readers) it is especially important to make sure that the right families are identified and attend. One ten-week program, Supporting Parents on Kids Education in Schools (SPOKES), teaches parents of struggling readers strategies to support their children's reading. A recent randomised controlled trial in 68 primary schools in England found no overall effect on reading or social-emotional outcomes in the short-term; this appears to be because the groups included children of higher ability than the program was designed for.[21] There is some indication that the approach may be effective in the long-term when targeted successfully.

Plan carefully for group-based sessions for parents

When embarking on more intensive approaches it is especially important to acknowledge the challenges and plan carefully. Providing a series of group-based workshops for parents, sometimes with separate activities for children, can be effective for a range of outcomes, including academic attainment, other learning outcomes, and aspects of children's social-emotional development,[44,45,46] but it is often costly and the parents who could benefit most may not be the ones who attend. Often only around a third of parents intended for support attend at least one session.[47] Box 7 summarises some of the barriers to participation in programs aimed at supporting parents, and some of the potential solutions.

There is evidence that providing incentives can boost attendance, but it also increases costs and has not always been associated with improved outcomes.[48] Schools should therefore plan carefully before undertaking such activities, and recognise that where needs are greater, more resources (including time) will be required – for example, in speaking to parents face-to-face in order to build relationships and increase take-up.[49]

A convenient time and accessible location, paired with an informal and welcoming environment, appear to be most important for enabling parents to attend group sessions. Sometimes parents may find a new approach intimidating, or worry that it is too demanding, or simply be unsure what it is on offer based on the initial information provided.

Box 7: Barriers to parents accessing services and strategies to overcome them

Reviews of the evidence identify why families can be perceived as 'hard to reach' and what services can do to address this.[47,50] 50 Parents' isolation from services may be involuntary (for example, owing to language differences, poor health, long or unsociable work hours, financial barriers) or voluntary (for example, because engagement with services would be threatening or stigmatising). In an education context, parents' own poor experience of school can contribute to a reticence to engage fully in children's learning. Immediate barriers commonly relate to:

- **where and when support is delivered** – if these conflict with work hours and childcare commitments, or where accessibility is an issue; and
- **how an offer is communicated** – for example, by using of inaccessible language or professional jargon, services being intimidating or insufficiently visible, and staff appearing disinterested.

Responses to these barriers include:

- **flexible location and timing of services** – including home visits and outreach services for families who lack transport or live in rural areas; and
- **making services welcoming and less intimidating** – for instance, by employing staff who can relate to parents, and making repeated attempts, if needed, to engage the families concerned. Recruiting parents might involve using parent ambassadors, securing referrals from peers, advertising services in places frequented by families, and translating promotion materials into relevant languages. At the heart of all of these is building relationships of trust.

Consider home visiting for younger children

Home visits may be particularly beneficial for parents least likely to attend meetings at preschool or school, or those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.[51] They commonly focus on promoting a more positive home learning environment in the early years, including sensitive parent-child interaction and reading with and to children, and there is evidence that they can have positive effects on parenting behaviours and children's early learning outcomes.[52] Programs that provide one or more home visits per month, and that include active learning (for example, visitors modelling effective play or reading strategies) have been associated with larger positive impacts.[53]

Occasional, relationship-building home-visits may be helpful prior to inviting parents to get involved in school-based activities or courses, or at key transitions at school, but are unlikely to be intensive enough on their own to lead to changes in parents' engagement with learning.

Encourage a consistent approach to behaviour

Strategies that help parents and schools to take a consistent approach to behaviour are likely to be beneficial.[54] For example, promising approaches involve parents and teachers setting goals for their child, agreeing and implementing specific strategies that can be implemented at home and school to help their child's behaviour, responding consistently to children's behaviour, and gathering information to assess their child's progress.[55]

There is promising evidence for some structured, targeted interventions for parents aimed at improving children's social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes, which are known to be important for academic attainment.[56,57] These include group courses for parents that help to manage difficult behaviour. For instance, Incredible Years has been shown to improve children's behaviour in multiple trials and in several countries (Box 8).[58,59] For young children (under seven), an analysis of parenting interventions focused on improving children's behaviour[60] identified four components that appeared to be particularly important:

- parents have opportunities to practise skills with their child (for example, the parent helping their child through an activity while a facilitator observes);
- teaching skills in communicating emotions (for example, active listening and reflecting back what the child says);
- supporting parents to interact positively (for example, how to interact on the child's level during play and to let the child take the lead during a play activity); and
- disciplinary consistency (responding to a behaviour in the same way with the same consequence).

Box 8: Incredible Years

Incredible Years is a group-based parenting course lasting between 12 and 18 weeks and is targeted at parents of children aged 0 to 12 years (four different versions) with behaviour difficulties. Parents view video vignettes depicting parent models interacting with children in different situations, after which they discuss the videos with trained facilitators and practise learned techniques in role plays.

Parents are encouraged to practise skills between sessions via home assignments. The BASIC version focuses on play skills, praise and rewards, limit-setting, and handling misbehaviour, while the ADVANCE component goes deeper into interpersonal issues such as communication and problem solving. A meta-analysis involving 50 studies found that the program is effective, with larger effects in studies including families with greater needs.[58]

Schools may also wish to look out for a Guidance Report from Evidence for Learning on Behaviour which will be published in 2020.

Acting on the evidence

Evidence for Learning has produced a Guidance Report 'Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation' which can be used as a guide as you plan to implement changes. Figure 1 provides an overview of the implementation process which school can apply to any implementation challenge.

The stages of implementation

Foundations for good implementation

- ✓ Treat implementation as a process, not an event. Plan and execute it in stages.
- ✓ Create a leadership environment and school climate that is conducive to good implementation.

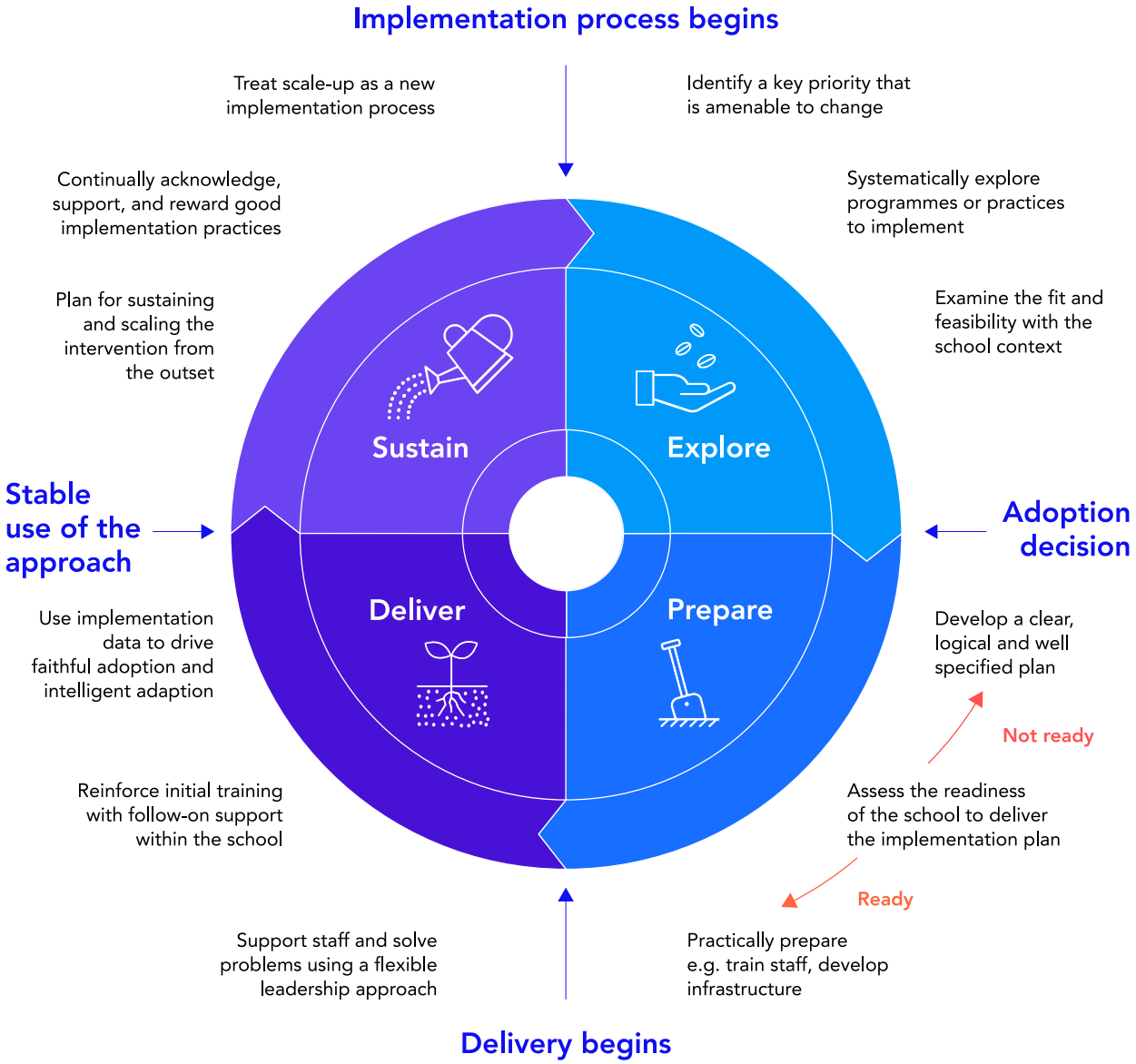


Figure 1: Implementation can be described as a series of stages relating to thinking about, preparing for, delivering, and sustaining change.

To assist you in implementation around an area of working with parents, you may wish to consider a range of principles. We have expressed these as questions to prompt reflection, aligned to The Stages of Implementation detailed on the previous page. These stages are explored further in our Guidance Report 'Putting Evidence to Work: A School's Guide to Implementation'.

Foundations for good implementation

Checklist questions

- ✓ Have the school leadership team created a clear vision and understanding of expectations about the purpose of parent engagement in the school?
- ✓ Are there opportunities to make fewer, but more strategic, decisions around how you are working with parents to support student's learning?

Explore

Checklist questions

- ✓ Have you completed an audit of current parent engagement activities at your school?
- ✓ Have you invited parents into the conversation to understand their perceptions and needs?
- ✓ Have you listened to a range of stakeholders, not just the parents who are the most active?
- ✓ Have you explored the evidence available and considered its feasibility in your context?

Prepare

Checklist questions

- ✓ Does the school leadership have a logical action plan as to how to work with parents?
- ✓ Does everyone involved have a shared understanding of the action plan?
- ✓ Have you developed a plan to capture feedback on the process?

Acting on the evidence

Deliver

Checklist questions

- ✓ Have teachers been supported with appropriate professional learning around how to work with parents?
- ✓ Do you have a plan to roll out changes gradually, beginning with an initial team to test the new approach at a small scale?
- ✓ Have you used the data collected to adapt the approach?

Sustain

Checklist questions

- ✓ Have you developed a plan for the ongoing professional learning for teachers, supporting them to work with parents?
- ✓ Do you have a plan to scale the new approach that was tested?

Further reading

The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)

AITSL emphasises parent engagement through two of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, standards 3.7 and 7.3. The AITSL website contains illustrations of practice and resources to support the development of these standards at each.

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals, also developed by AITSL, prioritises 'Engaging and working with the community' as one of five key elements of a school leader role.

Australian Parents Council (APC)

The APC pursue policy, practice, programs, partnerships and collaboration that maximise school outcomes for all Australian children. They provide helpful advice that schools may find valuable in conversations with parents.

austparents.edu.au/information-and-advice/supporting-childrens-learning/

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)

ARACY exists because Australian children aren't doing as well as they should be in a wealthy country, and because researchers, service providers and policy makers need to work together for this change to occur. ARACY's 2012 report[1] for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau supports a number of recommendations in this report, including providing additional context around communication (Recommendation 3) and sustained and intensive support (Recommendation 4). aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/7/filename/Parental_engagement_in_learning_and_schooling_Lessons_from_research_BUREAU_ARACY_August_2012.pdf

Evidence for Learning

Evidence for Learning highlights the international research available on Parental Engagement as one approach within both the Teaching & Learning Toolkit and the Early Childhood Education Toolkit.

evidenceforlearning.org.au/teaching-and-learning-toolkit/parental-engagement/

evidenceforlearning.org.au/early-childhood-education-toolkit/parental-engagement/

Evidence for Learning have collaborated with the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and Telethon Kids to develop the Australasian Research to support the contextualisation of international research:

evidenceforlearning.org.au/the-toolkits/the-teaching-and-learning-toolkit/australasian-research-summaries/parental-engagement/

evidenceforlearning.org.au/the-toolkits/early-childhood-education-toolkit/australasian-research-summaries/parental-engagement/

raisingchildren.net.au

raisingchildren.net.au provide free, reliable, up-to-date and independent information to help families grow and thrive together. Funded by the Australian Government, designed for busy families, it contains resources that support parents engage with their child's school, which schools may find valuable.

raisingchildren.net.au/

How was this guide compiled?

This Guidance Report draws on the best available evidence regarding the development of parental engagement in children's learning based on a review conducted by Dr Nick Axford (University of Plymouth), Dr Vashti Berry (University of Exeter), Dr Jenny Lloyd (University of Exeter), Dr Darren Moore (University of Exeter), Morwenna Rogers (University of Exeter), Alison Hurst (University of Exeter), Kelly Blockley (university of Plymouth), Hannah Durkin (University of Exeter), and Jacqueline Minton (University of Exeter).

The Guidance Report was created over four stages:

1. **Scoping**. The EEF consulted with a number of teachers and academics about the scope of the report. We then appointed an advisory panel and the review team, and agreed research questions for the review.
2. **Evidence review**. The review team conducted searches for the best available international evidence using a range of databases, and a systematic methodology to classify strength of evidence.
3. **Research on current practice**. The review team also conducted a survey of 180 schools in England to understand what schools are currently doing in relation to engaging parents, and interviewed 16 school leaders and three subject experts.
4. **Writing recommendations**. The EEF worked with the advisory panel and reviewers to draft the Guidance Report and recommendations. The final Guidance Report was written by Matthew van Poortvliet (EEF), Nick Axford (University of Plymouth) and Jenny Lloyd (University of Exeter) with input and feedback from many others.

The advisory panel included Laura Barbour (Sutton Trust), Professor Tracey Bywater (University of York), Janet Davies (Parental Engagement Network), Fiona Jelley (University of Oxford), Dr Janet Goodall (University of Bath), Dr Julian Grenier (Sheringham Nursery School), Stuart Mathers (EEF), Professor Kathy Sylva (University of Oxford), and Chris Woodcock (Durrington Research School, part of DMAT). We would like to thank them for the support, challenge, and input they provided throughout the process.

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