CHAPTER 1
WHY DOES PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT MATTER?

This chapter explores the ideas that:

- **Parents, carers and teachers are united in wanting the best for children: focusing on this is key**
- **Challenges to effective home–school engagement include fear and mistrust on both sides, a lack of effective training in some schools and time-pressures**
- **Opportunities for effective home–school engagement include a sense of community, greater lines of communication and an appreciation of school staff.**

KEY PRINCIPLES – WHAT THIS BOOK IS AND WHAT IT ISN'T...

We're not in the business of telling people how to teach – and we're certainly not out to tell parents and carers how to parent. This isn't a teaching or parenting manual. We appreciate that with this little guide, we've taken on a huge, tricky and often highly emotive subject. We appreciate that 'parenting' comes in a myriad of different forms and we use the term 'parent' to refer to parents and carers in all their forms. We also appreciate the need to embrace a wide range of voices and perspectives and this book will act to signpost areas where more research would be welcomed. We avoid some of the sweeping generalisations sometimes heard in staffrooms and playgrounds. Instead of 'hard-to-reach' parents, we consider 'hard-to-reach' schools; instead of 'difficult' parents or 'unapproachable' staff, we look at the factors which might contribute to these challenges and offer research-based and practical approaches which have worked in schools.

This guide is for teachers and school staff in all roles, working in both the state and independent sectors. While research has taken place predominantly in the UK, as this is where both authors are based, findings may also be useful internationally.

THE RESEARCH

A significant amount of the material in our book is based on our own experience in schools, totalling over 30 years and based on a range of primary, secondary, state, alternative, special needs and mainstream settings and in governance roles. We also come into contact regularly with fellow staff in schools and their experiences find their way into our findings, though they are completely anonymised. In order to capture key contemporary themes and ensure our data is robust, we undertook two surveys – one for parents and carers and one for staff working in schools. The surveys included both qualitative and quantitative responses and asked for responses about the:

- Impact of Covid-19 on home–school relationships

- Quality of relationships between parents and schools

- Evolving nature of engagement between parents and schools as children get older

- Biggest challenges in terms of home–school engagement for parents and teachers respectively

- Most positive elements of home–school engagement for parents and teachers respectively.

228 participants responded to the parent-carer survey and 313 school staff to the one aimed at teachers, school leaders, pastoral leaders and teaching assistants.

THE HOME–SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP MATTERS

When asked how important parental engagement with schools is, the consensus is unanimous. 'It's crucial', said one governor. 'It's everything!' In our survey, 98% of parents and carers and 97% of school staff agreed or strongly agreed that a strong relationship between home and school is important.

The research supports this view. Harris and Goodall (2007: 7) summarise the importance of effective parental engagement as follows:

> The research evidence is consistent, in demonstrating that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life. When schools, families and community work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more.

Children are like sponges. Learning takes place constantly and the messages they receive at home mean even more than those they receive at school. Kallivayalil and Thomas (2019) remind us that the parent is the child's first and ongoing teacher and that students with strong support from home 'have achieved better grades at school and grown up with a higher self-esteem'.

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a powerful model that highlights the crucial and intertwined factors that influence children, families and schools (Figure 1.1).
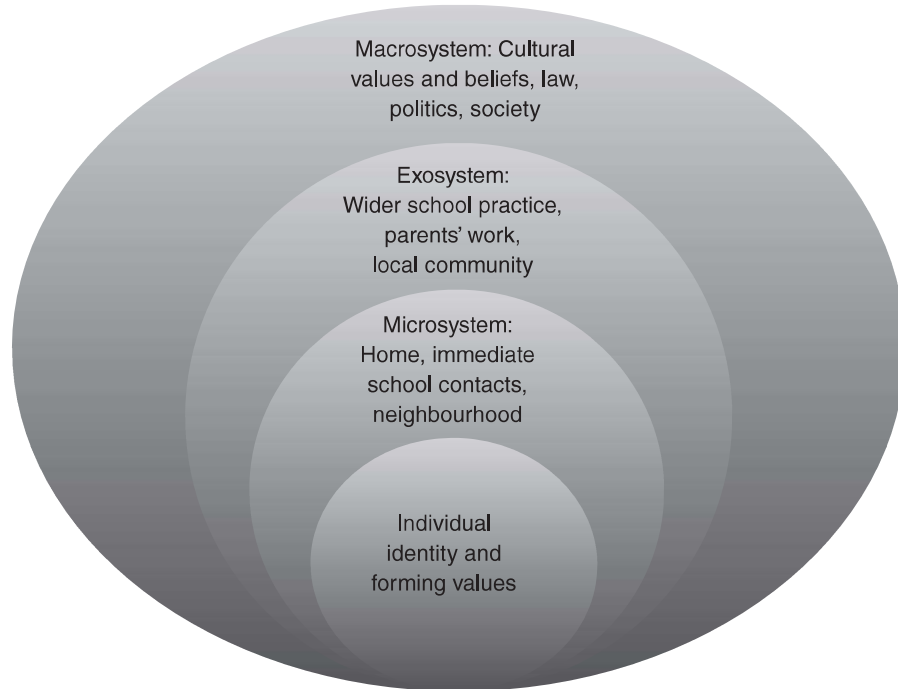
Macrosystem: Cultural values and beliefs, law, politics, society

Exosystem: Wider school practice, parents' work, local community

Microsystem: Home, immediate school contacts, neighbourhood

Individual identity and forming values

Figure 1.1   Ecological systems: Families and schools (our interpretation of a model based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979))

REFLECTION

Consider your school community, class or an individual student. Adapt the ecological model to consider the influences on their learning and development.

How are the following factors affecting their evolving identity and values?

> **Microsystem: home, teachers, support staff, office staff, canteen staff (immediate school contacts)**

> **Exosystem: school policies and procedures, school values and practices, parental work (or lack thereof), community contacts**

> **Macrosystem: government policy, cost of living, cultural norms**

What steps can you take in your role to positively influence this development? Where can you have greatest impact?

WHAT UNITES PARENTS AND SCHOOLS?

The differences that separate human beings are nothing compared to the similarities that bond us together.
Sophie Grégoire Trudeau (Phillips, 2016)

The difference between schools and many other businesses is that it's all about humans – living organisms, working with other living organisms. This can feel complex and daunting at times, but the home–school relationship is, at its root, very simple:

Parents and teachers want the best for children.

In the words of one parent, we want our children to be happy, healthy and kind. Success, confidence, resilience, drive and focus all come into it too, but ultimately what unites us as adults devoted to young people is greater than what divides us.

In the words of another parent:

> Cut the crap. How can we work together to give my children the best experience? (Parent survey participant)

Attention management for busy teachers is key. We could tie ourselves in knots dwelling on misunderstandings and falling into defensiveness, but it doesn't help anything. Consider what parents want for their children. Research conducted by Robbins and Dempster (2021) reveals that starting a conversation with test results is unlikely to create a bond. Children's happiness is the priority.

EXERCISE

Do parents know how much they matter?

We've established that parents really, really matter to the successful learning and development of children. Do they know how much they matter in your organisation or classroom? What evidence do you have to demonstrate this? Using the key criteria from Harris and Goodall (2007), take time with other members of staff to consider to what extent:

1   **Parents are supporting learning at home.**

2   **The school offers bespoke support to parents from socio-economic and ethnic groups less likely to engage with school.**

3   **There is mutual trust and respect between parents and teachers.**

4   **Parents and schools are jointly committed to improving learning outcomes.**

5   Parents and schools work effectively together on positive behaviour.

6   The school prioritises parental engagement.

7   Staff feel confident and competent when engaging with parents.

As you work through the rest of this book, consider what strategies you might adopt to ensure effective working relationships with parents.

Based on Harris and Goodall (2007)

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

COVID-19

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mental health is an acute and ongoing concern. Factors likely to influence poor mental health include:

- Social isolation (including those shielding)

- Job loss and financial loss

- Housing insecurity and quality

- Reduced access to mental health services.

This is likely to affect both our students and their parents.

As we write this book, the coronavirus pandemic continues to influence all aspects of human existence. The 'gaps' in society which existed before the outbreak have turned into huge crevasses. As highlighted by the *Covid-19 Social Study* (UCL, 2020), people who were vulnerable before the pandemic are likely to be even more vulnerable now. This ongoing study highlights the following (as of November 2021):

- Widening socio-economic inequalities: 'Those who were struggling financially before the pandemic have consistently been more than twice as likely to say they are worse off than those who were living comfortably (assessed in June and November 2020 and October 2021).' (Report – week 81–84)

- Those from low-income households (less than 30k pa) reported higher levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness. (Report – week 81–84)

- Worries about accessing sufficient food affect around one in eight: 'These concerns are higher in people with a mental or physical health diagnosis and people with lower household incomes.' (Report – week 77–80)

- Nearly half of adults (44%) reported having experienced some kind of discrimination (e.g., due to gender, age, race/ethnicity, or some other characteristic) since the start of the pandemic. (Report – week 73–76)

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH

The mental health crisis has had a profound effect on young people. The Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools (2021) reported the following startling findings. The findings were based on seven focus groups of teachers, parents and young people. Compared to before the pandemic:

- **62%** of young people reported feeling **anxious or worried** more frequently

- **46%** reported feeling a **continuous low mood or sadness** more frequently

- **42%** reported **not getting any enjoyment out of life** more frequently

- **38%** reported feeling **hopeless or tearful** more frequently

- **18%** reported having **suicidal thoughts** more frequently.

Parents, too, have suffered as a result of the pandemic, with sharp rises in depression and anxiety. Unsurprisingly, the groups most affected are those who are socially isolated, have suffered from financial losses and are living in poor or insecure housing.

The effects of such a mental health crisis are likely to be long-lasting and significant, which means the 'business as usual' messages from Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) and the government and the focus on academic standards and attendance seem starkly at odds with an urgent need to nurture children and families.

HOME–SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS: CHALLENGES

FEAR AND MISTRUST

When Emma first started teaching, it was a good three years before she could pick up the phone to a parent without a sense of sick fear at the pit of her stomach. Many new teachers feel the same. As a parent, Emma positively quaked when pre-school announced they were doing a 'home visit' and spent a whole day cleaning the house.

What's this about? At its heart, on both sides, there is a fear of judgement. Is the teacher basically rubbish at their job? Is there a suggestion the parent has failed in their duty of care to their child?

Acknowledging the causes of this fear and mistrust in order to overcome them is absolutely key.

A LACK OF TRAINING

Startlingly, our research has revealed a distinct lack of quality training for teachers when working with parents. In our survey, a striking 73% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'My initial training for my role prepared me effectively to work with parents', and 83% with the statement 'I receive regular and meaningful professional development on working with parents'. Perhaps more worryingly, this issue is not lost on parents, with only 38% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement

'It is clear that teachers at our school/institution have been well trained to work effectively with parents'.

TIME!

Teachers are notorious for being perceived as 'busy'. The plethora of initiatives and priorities in schools makes this understandable, but frankly, not acceptable as a reason for not engaging effectively with parents.

When it comes to parents, schools are sometimes guilty of forgetting that they have lives and jobs too. Consideration of parents' own priorities when scheduling parental consultation events, assemblies and other school events is key.

HOME–SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS: OPPORTUNITIES

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

With the pandemic has come a heightened sense of community. When the pandemic hit, many schools set to work ensuring their children's most basic needs were met before worrying too much about learning and progress. Food parcels, art packages, and reading books were delivered to homes all over the country and the precious impact of this on relationships should not be underestimated. There was a sense of schools being the centre, the hub of the community. New communalities were discovered – parents found that teachers, too, were struggling with vulnerable relatives, teaching their own children at home and worrying about catching the virus. These lessons learned have been profound and must be cherished and built on.

GREATER LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Communication pathways between parents and schools have been strengthened by the pandemic. Schools which took the time to phone the homes of students on a regular basis to check on their progress and wellbeing have gained an increased sense of trust from parents. Knowing that somebody cares enough to take the time to pick up the phone goes a long way. While this has come with its challenges (see Chapter 5), improved

levels of IT literacy mean that the potential for sharing student progress, resolving issues promptly and maintaining positive relationships is huge.

AN APPRECIATION OF TEACHERS

The flurry of memes on social media depicting parents tearing their hair out as they tried to educate their own children, while maintaining their own responsibilities, revealed in many cases a new-found respect of teachers. 'You have 30 of them? I can't even handle one!' Many parents took time to get their heads around the curriculum (the memory of puzzling out the inner angles of irregular polygons makes my head hurt to this day!). While the media portrayals of teachers sometimes caused frustration, knowing our parents appreciate us goes a long way and provides a valuable new base to build on.

We can only hope this trend continues...

NOTE IT DOWN!

Having read this chapter, now identify and note down:

Your biggest professional challenge when engaging with parents

Your biggest opportunities or sources of optimism when engaging with parents