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learning

Parents as partners in learning

Discover how technology helps schools, parents and learners work together

Parents' needs are changing
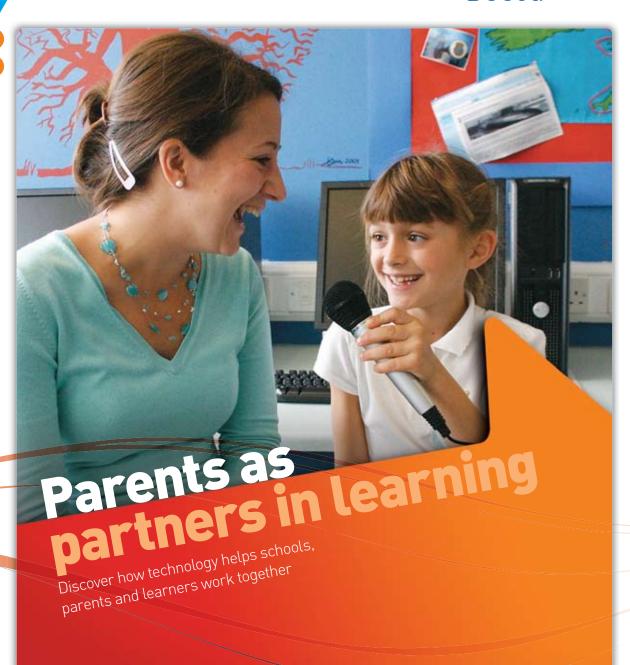
Parents make a critical contribution to their children's success at school and it is important that they have a strong voice at all levels of the system.

Building a 21st Century School System, (DCSF)

Parents **matter**

Parents' needs are changing. Many schools are experiencing a growing demand from parents for greater reassurance about their child's well-being, achievement and progress.

Parents increasingly expect:

- updates on their child's progress and additional learning needs
- information to help them support their child outside the classroom
- details of their child's homework.

Getting parents more actively involved in their children's education really matters. Research by Desforges (2003) shows that parents' influence on student learning outcomes is greater than the school's. This is particularly true of 'hard to reach' parents.

The SSAT (2007) found:

- working more closely with parents consistently leads to improvement in student attendance, behaviour and achievement
- successfully engaging hard to reach parents is one of the best ways of raising school performance and student achievement.

According to Ofsted (2007), pupils' achievement clearly improved in schools where parental involvement was judged to be outstanding. Since September 2009, Ofsted have been inspecting how effectively a school engages with parents and carers.

WHAT'S INSIDE

This guide introduces you to the ways you can use technology to improve communications with parents.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT:

www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk /parentsaspartners

Communication **matters**

Developing partnerships with parents is key to improving standards. This is why Ofsted inspections now include the quality of a school's communication with its parents.

67%
of teachers said parents not in regular contact didn't realise the importance of their support to their child's development*

60%
of teachers think parents who aren't in regular contact believe that their job stops at the school gates*

89%
of parents say technology can help keep them in contact with their child's school*

54%
of teachers believed parents were just too busy to engage with the school and the teachers*

Parents want information at a time and in ways that better suit them. They want to discuss the information they receive with the school.

The Children's Plan (DCSF) recognises parents' needs and expects schools to respond using technology.

Using technology brings real benefits to the learner, to parents and to schools:

- parents are kept up-to-date with their child's learning and development

- children are motivated by their parents' interest and involvement

- schools are more efficient and effective in encouraging parental engagement.

* Schools and Parents: The New Partnership, Becta 2009
www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/schoolsandparents

Technology **matters**

You may have heard the term 'online reporting', but what does it really mean?

It's about using various technologies to communicate with parents. It's also about giving parents secure access to information on their child's progress, achievement, attendance, behaviour and educational needs.

Many schools are already using a wide variety of technologies to keep in touch with parents:

- websites, portals and learning platforms
- text and phone messaging
- email and electronic newsletters
- podcasts and school radio.

The aim is to improve the quality of dialogue between schools, learners and parents. This will help parents understand and support their child's learning.

Parents will be able to work with schools as equal partners in improving their child's achievements.

This can be done without increasing teachers' workloads by using established management information systems more effectively.

Different schools are at different stages on the journey towards developing partnerships with parents. Similarly, not all parents have easy access to all types of technology. You will need to think about what information to make available and how best to provide it.

"Parents will be able to get information about their child's behaviour, attendance, any special educational needs and achievements online in secondary schools by 2010 and in primary by 2012."

The Children's Plan
Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)
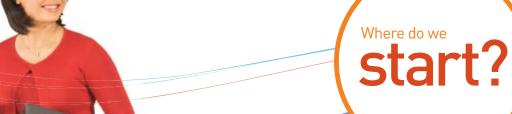
What's **involved?**

If you feel daunted, even overwhelmed, you are not alone. Many schools are unsure exactly what they should be communicating, let alone how best to do it.

Even schools that are already using technology to keep in touch can evaluate and improve their approach.

What information should we **make available?**

Is this information **sensitive?**

Where do we **start?**

On a basic level, online access to information about school holidays can be of real value to parents. Making homework assignments available electronically makes for stronger partnerships between schools, parents and learners. As does reporting when a child has done particularly well in a lesson.
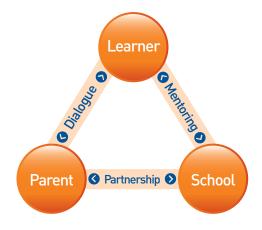
Some schools, like The Radclyffe School in Oldham, use their management information system (MIS) to build a complete picture of each student. Parents have secure online access to records on their child's academic progress, behaviour, attendance, punctuality and special educational needs (SEN). This keeps parents fully informed and engaged in their child's achievements and every aspect of school life.

Anson Primary School in Brent uses its secure website to keep parents in touch during school trips. Teachers and children post updates, photos and movie clips of their activities.

Schools should make information available in a way that is manageable for its staff.

They should ensure that the information that they give to parents and learners is clear, meaningful and timely. This helps to support more open dialogue between parents and learners.

By recording information as part of the learning and teaching process, technology can save valuable time and support timely reporting. Teachers can save the equivalent of up to one lesson per week by using technology for reporting.

What to **communicate**

Schools are not expected to share with parents every single piece of information they hold. The emphasis is on quality of information, not quantity.

The most useful method of communication between schools and parents is informal discussions informed by information made available through technology.

Each school will have different things it wants and is able to share readily with parents. Similarly, different parents will want different information.

Using technology is simply a more efficient, faster, easier and cheaper way to communicate with parents about:

- school as a whole
- what's being learnt in class
- an individual child.

It is for your school to work with parents to decide what needs communicating and to consider options that are manageable for staff and meaningful for parents.

Following are some examples of the type of information your school can share with parents.

School information »

- Term times and holidays
- School events, activities and calendar
- Ofsted reports
- Free school meal eligibility

Classroom information »

- Current projects and curriculum topics
- Homework assignments
- Upcoming field trips
- News about the class

Individual information

- Attainment and progress
- Progress and positive behaviour
- Attendance and challenging behaviour
- SEN

For more detailed options, visit:

www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk /parentsaspartners
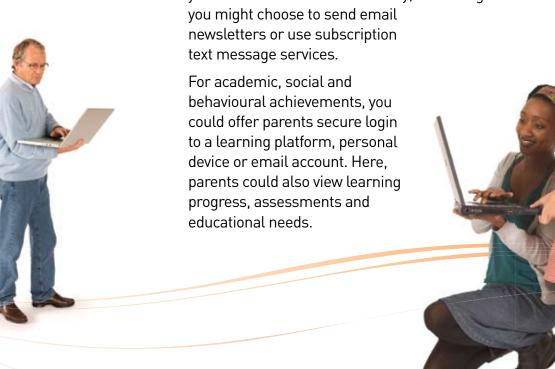
How to **communicate**

With so many different communication technologies available and so many individual priorities, there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Your school could make information about school terms, holidays, training days and parent events publicly accessible through your school website. Alternatively, you might choose to send email newsletters or use subscription text message services.

For academic, social and behavioural achievements, you could offer parents secure login to a learning platform, personal device or email account. Here, parents could also view learning progress, assessments and educational needs.

Your school and parents can send urgent information, such as attendance, sickness or transport arrangements, using email or text message alerts.
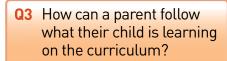
How you **communicate now**

It is important to review how you currently communicate different types of information with parents.

To get you started, here are some questions to ask yourself:

Q1 How do you communicate school news?
e.g. unexpected closure due to illness or weather.

Q2 How do you communicate about what is happening in school? e.g. events, school plays, sport etc.

Q3 How can a parent follow what their child is learning on the curriculum?

Q4 What methods do you use to let parents know about homework assignments?

Q5 How do you inform parents of their child's behaviour at school?

Q6 How do you let parents know if their child is absent from school?

Q7 What methods do you use to report on individual students' progress?

For more questions and advice:
www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk /askyourself

What it **could be like**

How technology can be used to communicate with parents	## 01 ### STARTING OUT	## 02 ### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS
SCHOOL How are you engaging parents in the wider aspects of school life? For example, school trips	Parents get information and details of school trips via email, electronic newsletters and the school website. Photographs taken on the trip are available on the school website after the trip.	Parents can return forms electronically and email questions about the trip. They can pay online for the trips using an electronic payment system. Electronic communication channels are in place to contact parents while children are away.
CLASSROOM How are you engaging parents in what is happening in the classroom? For example, classwork and homework	The school provides information about the curriculum, homework and general strategies on the school website. Parents have an email address for contacting the school for more information.	Parents can access information on the school website that shows what their child is currently learning. They can view the resources used in class and get information about other online resources to support this learning from home.
INDIVIDUALS How are you working in partnership with parents to support their child's progress and well-being? For example, improving face-to-face conversations	The school publishes its policies and home-school agreement online. Parents can access information from school reports electronically or online before parents' evenings and consultation days. Parents can go online and find out how to contact school to discuss particular concerns or issues.	Schools use things like emails and text messaging to inform parents of progress, achievements and issues as they happen. Parents can have timely discussions with their children and there are no surprises to deal with at parents' evening.

03

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Children post digital photographs online and write blogs while on school trips. Parents can view and comment on these and are less anxious about their children being away from home. They can have meaningful conversations about their experiences when their child returns. Parental surveys are used to help plan and improve future trips.

Parents can log on to the school website to see the progress their child has been making in class. They can find out what they will be learning next and get guidance on how they can support this learning. Parents and learners can comment on and add to the record of work and achievements from home.

Schools use texting, email and telephone conversations to share timely and accurate information with parents. Parents can log on to the school website to see an overview of their child's achievement, well-being and development. Parents have all the information they need for a conversation with the school as partners in their child's education.

TOP TIPS FROM SCHOOLS

"Provide ongoing support for parents and establish a continuing dialogue."

Westfield School

"Engage 'difficult' parents early and trial, trial and trial again."

Hodgson School

"Enable the children to help drive this process through at home."

Heston Impington Junior School

"Offer workshops to parents at parents' night on making the most of it."

Notre Dame High School

Getting **started**

Each school will be at a different stage on the journey towards getting parents as partners. Yet all schools will find it useful to consider the following four things:

A

POLICIES

Update wider school policies to reflect parental engagement including the online reporting expectations.

B

PARENTS

Consult with parents about how best to keep them informed.

C

STAFF

Provide advice for staff on recording appropriate information.

D

TECHNOLOGIES

Consider how to make more effective use of the technologies available in your school.

For more details about each of these steps visit:

www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/parentsaspartners

WHAT'S NEXT?

Next, you need to find out whether your current form of communication is suitable for your parents.

It is important to place working with parents at the heart of your school improvement plan and to respond to parents' needs. If you are considering making changes or introducing new technologies, you need to consult with parents. This will ensure your proposals match what they want. It will also help you identify needs, for example training sessions for parents.

For advice on questions to ask your parents:

www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/askyourparents

FIND OUT MORE

The Next Generation Learning website has lots of useful material to help you engage parents as partners.

- Download or order a toolkit to help you work through each of the 'Four things to consider' suggested in this booklet.

- Order copies of our parents booklet 'Supporting your child's learning' to use when talking to parents.

- Find out how other schools are working with parents. Get tips and guidance on how to move forward.

www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/parentsaspartners

PARENTS
AS PARTNERS
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Clear English Standard
WINNING DOCUMENT
PLAIN LANGUAGE COMMISSION

CORPORATE MEMBER OF
PLAIN LANGUAGE COMMISSION
Becta
committed to
clear communications