Using technology to improve parental engagement

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The leading early years education app helping make little futures big futures
Improving outcomes for children through more effective parental engagement by Jenny Barber

What is parental engagement?

‘Parental involvement takes many forms including good parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance.’ [Charles Desforges, 2003]

Parental engagement has always been an important part of good early years practice. This is overwhelmingly supported by research (see below), which concludes that parents who are involved in their children’s learning in the early years are more likely to continue this support through their schooling, having a positive effect on a child’s attainment.

Why is parental engagement so important?

‘Our findings show that it is the (parental) involvement of learning activities in the home that is most closely associated with better cognitive attainment in the early years.’ [Sylva et al, 1999]

‘The involvement of parents in school initiated interventions raises achievement when the structures are in place for effective partnerships.’ [Wolfendale and Bastiani, 2000].

‘Parental engagement is so vital in the early years… creating that pattern of engagement early is key, so parents and carers can then develop this throughout their child’s education.’ [Professor Sonia Blandford, 2015]

The importance of parents as educators

As settings, we need to recognise the important role that parents play in their child’s life, and how positive relationships with them benefit the child, the setting and the parents themselves. The link we establish with the child and their family enhances all aspects of the child’s experience in the setting. The beneficial relationships that surround the child will enable learning and development to take place.

What will Ofsted look for?

The introduction of the Common Inspection Framework includes an added emphasis on enabling parents to support their child’s learning and development at home – the ‘Good’ outcome for ‘Quality of teaching, learning and assessment’, it states:

‘The key person system works effectively to engage parents, including those who may be more reluctant to contribute, in their children’s learning. Parents contribute to initial assessments of children’s starting points on entry and they are kept informed about their children’s progress. Parents are encouraged to support and share information about their children’s learning and development at home.’ [Early Years Inspection Handbook, September 2015]
Engaged parents lead to better life chances for children

Frank Field’s *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults, the report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances* [HM Government; December 2010] explored all aspects of a child’s life to ascertain what factors influenced later outcomes and what measures could be put in place to improve those outcomes. Examining the effect of parental engagement in education, Field notes:

‘Research looking at children who do well despite difficult circumstances has illustrated clearly the impact that parents have. Several reports looking at the 1958 and 1970 cohort studies have shown that disadvantaged children who did well were more likely to have a good relationship with their parents and have parents who were involved with their education. [for example, see Pilling, 1990]…

‘Blanden found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who had been read to on a daily basis at age five, and whose parents had been very interested in their child’s education at age ten, were less likely to be living in poverty at age 30. She found that the effect of parents’ interest was independent of the effect of parents being more educated. For boys, having a father with little or no interest in their education reduced their chances of moving out of poverty as adults by 25 percentage points. For girls, the impact of having a mother with little or no interest in their education reduced the chance by a similar amount.’ [Blanden, 2006]

Ofsted inspectors will be looking to see how you support parents to understand how their children should progress and how they can contribute to that progress, and also that you are providing information to help parents understand how they can contribute to their child’s progress in relation to their age.

When does engagement begin?
For many settings, parental engagement begins with home visits, which can provide a unique insight into the child’s life and will begin to establish the key foundations of the relationship with the parents. It is once the child begins in the setting that we need to
reflect on our practices, looking at the ways in which we can reach all parents.

Starting point assessments need to be completed and shared in conjunction with parents, so that you can identify any discrepancies between what the child enjoys and can do at home and at the setting. Ofsted will look specifically for parental contribution to the starting points assessment.

Overcoming barriers to engagement
Parental engagement can sometimes be a challenge, with ‘time’ becoming more of an issue and a growing percentage of parents who seem reluctant to engage. We live in a diverse society and we need to ensure that we are fully inclusive of parental needs, finding ways to interact that will ultimately benefit the child. When practitioners and parents work together, with each contributing their particular expertise and knowledge, it helps to overcome barriers that might otherwise prevent parental engagement.

Barriers can be emotional (fear of being judged by others; low self-esteem, low confidence, and so on); there might be language and communication issues; and as mentioned above, time might be an issue.

To help overcome these barriers, you need to ensure you are being sensitive and are actively listening to parents, looking at ways to involve and include them in a relaxed manner. Technology, such as an app, can be used to overcome many of these barriers, making it easier for parents to effectively engage with settings and to become more involved in their child’s learning.

How can technology improve parental engagement?
You should already be sharing observations with parents, through parent evenings, informal chats, or online via an appropriate app, and also encouraging parents to carry out their own observations of children.

When sharing summative assessments/termly reports with parents, be sure to identify how the setting and home can work together to support the child, ensuring that you provide clear examples and explaining ‘where next’ for the child.

Many settings and schools are moving to a tablet-based system for recording observations and for sharing information with parents, reporting vastly improved parental engagement since making the switch. Parents are able to view and comment on their child’s observations in their own time and can add their own observations – in some instances, even videos of their child. This process actively engages the parents in a practical way and values their input, removing many of the potential barriers.

By adding tech-based solutions to your repertoire of communication channels, you can help to make parents feel valued, informed, and involved in their child’s learning, providing a stronger basis from which to support learning and development, and helping to improve outcomes.

Useful resources
- PEAL materials support practitioners to develop parental involvement in children’s early learning – www.peal.org.uk/

References
We know from the research of Professor Charles Desforges that the most influential person, in terms of learning, is the parent or carer. In creating an environment where parental engagement can flourish, the following two principles are key. That parents and carers are:

- **Treated as equals**: Equal with teachers, leaders and other professionals in the role that they play in educating their children;
- **With purpose**: In a structured conversation process where parents and teachers within the settings and schools are trained to work around the child to clear and targeted goals in maths, early reading and literacy.

A child learns to learn, which is why creating a pattern of engagement with parents, from a child’s early days in the setting, is key. Even highly educated parents need to know how to contribute in an appropriate way, and so working in partnership with a setting can achieve the following positive outcomes In summary:

- It gives the parents confidence to be able to say they ‘can do it’.
- It gives them shared aspirations for reading, writing and maths.
- It provides a platform to talk about any potential barriers at home (which could be social or environmental, but also an insight into interests and hobbies).
- It sets the goals for what achievement looks like, but in small steps.
- Having a structured 30 minutes — you can achieve a great deal when you have an outcome in mind.

Parent engagement is one of the key pillars in all Assessment for All programmes because of the overwhelming evidence that children attain more when parents are involved regardless of challenges, family background or circumstance. Professor Charles Deforges describes Achievement for All as a ‘game changer’ and encourages all settings to engage with the programme.

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**Benefits of technology**

The use of technology, particularly online and app-based resources, is becoming integral to improving parental engagement across all types of settings. These have huge advantages in the setting, which include:

- Providing the platform for a more structured and effective form of communication with both parents.
- Giving greater access to early years resources.
- Freeing up time to spend on a child’s learning and development journey, rather than on paperwork.
- The ability to join up the progress and development of their child from home in their own time.
- Linking the child’s progress to built-in Early Years Foundation Stage milestones.

These benefits are the key features of Kinderly (brought to you by NurseryBook) an app for early years education. Having identified how this type of technology can facilitate the partnership between setting, parent, and child, Professor Blandford is keen to work with Kinderly to help all children achieve, regardless of background, and to embed successful parental engagement in settings across the UK.
Case study: Auden Place Community Nursery

using Kinderly to engage parents in their child’s learning journey

Auden Place Community Nursery, in Primrose Hill, North London, prides itself on having a dynamic and innovative approach to childcare that puts community and parental engagement at the heart of what they do.

Nursery manager, Mikki Parkes, believes that when you establish good parental engagement, the children flourish and are proud to have their parents involved.

Most recently, Mikki decided to install Kinderly to further the connection and communication between home and setting, providing a new channel for engagement at the nursery. The Kinderly app enables the setting to do the following:

- Securely capture and share the children’s learning journey against the Early Years Foundation Stage, without the need for paperwork.
- Provide a secure platform for parents to share feedback from home.
- Distribute a weekly room-specific newsletter – including what areas of learning are being focused on and areas parents can focus on at home.

This compliments the engagement programme at Auden Place and the impact and benefits can already be seen:

For parents
- Being online, they can engage and communicate in their own time – they can read and review their child’s daily activities, development and achievements when it works for them.
- Improved engagement and communication with parents and carers that are harder to reach.
- Can follow their child’s progress in real time.
- All parents are signed up and this has become a core communication channel.

For nursery staff
- Observations are ‘quicker, easier and in-room’.
- Key workers can input more of their own personality into their observations.
- Children are becoming more involved in their own observations.
- ‘It’s easy and quick for the key workers as they are all used to using their smartphones,’ says Mikki.
- Better feedback at handover to parents, because it is now focused on events from the day and not on the diary of food, sleep and toilet movements, which are loaded directly onto the app.
- Parents are receiving more structured communication; the app does not replace personal interaction and two-way conversation, but complements it.
- More time to spend with the children during the day.
- Ofsted – clearly demonstrate how you communicate and engage with parents.

Technology has become part of the learning journey at Auden Place – everyone is involved and included, and everyone is benefiting.

Kinderly’s intuitive, specialist app makes the early years experience better by focusing valuable time on a child’s learning journey and increasing positive parent engagement. Kinderly’s online web and mobile app makes it quick and easy for early years childcare practitioners to securely record and share children’s learning journeys against the Early Years Foundation Stage, without the need for paperwork. By choosing to share photos and suggested activities/resources with parents, they get precious insight into their children’s daily activities and everyday miracles, as well as understanding how to support learning and development at home.

For more information or to sign up for a free 30 day trial, please visit www.kinderly.co.uk/eye

Use promotional code EYE2016 to receive 20% off for the first 12 months after your free trial