



## **Working with children and families**

### *Parental involvement*

#### **RONNIE FLYNN**

Glenlee is a four hundred place Primary school in Hamilton near Glasgow. Its Head Teacher tells us why parent-school partnerships are important.

#### **JIM REID**

Parents are key partners in children's learning. I think that if parents and children are working together along with the school, then that will ease the achievement. I think it's important that children see that their parents value education, and they value education more so, if they feel that their parents are involved in their education and learning.

It's also important in the sense that there's a development role for schools in enabling parents to work most effectively with their children, so that parents know the activities and the learning outcomes that are happening within schools and how they can best support the child. As issues arise and as the curriculum changes, so the notion of partnership with parents changes as well. Within the school we have a wide variety of parental initiatives. We have parents who work in a classroom context, to support learning, but we also have a number of other initiatives that are worth talking about.

#### **RONNIE FLYNN**

Because of its commitment to partnership with parents, the school has a member of staff dedicated to developing parental involvement.

#### **YVONNE CHAPMAN**

My name's Yvonne Chapman, I'm the home school partnership worker in Glenlee primary school. Basically we work trying to bring parents into school, trying to create a partnership between parents and school, teachers and children, and we work with children and the parents in kind of both formal and informal settings. When we work with parents it's definitely in a partnership role, they're not helping me, they are coming in, they're working with us, and they're working to the best of their child's needs, that's why we're here because we're all wanting the best for children.

The main message we'd want to give them is that we're working for the benefit of the child, and what comes to mind at that point is, sometimes parents whose children get into a lot of bother at school, and who are struggling at school, are normally the parents who do shy away from school, and they are frightened. We're all working here for the benefit of your child, and we need all the support we can get. And we understand a lot of the parents are in difficult situations, home environments. Sometimes they can't manage to come into school every day to take part in this group or that group, because their personal circumstances just don't allow that. But what we're saying is we're here for them.

#### **RONNIE FLYNN**

Mount Pleasant is a traditional Black Country school with a long history. Gail Bedford is the Head teacher and has a strong interest in parental partnership.

#### **GAIL BEDFORD**

What we've now got is an evolved family learning programme, which involves parents working with their children from pre-nursery, so that's the three year olds, right through until the children are eleven. And it's a structured programme, and the focus is on our having communicated to parents over the years the importance of their support. The most important group of people that we can work with are the parents. Because together, we can be

supporting the individual child, and together we're not pulling against standards and expectations from one side, parents one side, school.

**RONNIE FLYNN**

Members of Gail's staff also support parental partnership.

**CLAIRE**

You're forging links between home and school, which hopefully will carry on through the child's education life, especially at primary school, and also it means that the children and the parents become more confident with things that are going on at school, and can take them home and communicate with each other on those terms.

In year one we're encouraging the parents to be more aware of what we're doing, so that they again can take the information home and back us up with whatever we're trying to achieve. We're also trying to improve relationships between parents and teachers, so that everyone's more confident with each other.

**RONNIE FLYNN**

Yet both Head teachers agree that involving parents is never easy, and offer ideas on how to encourage reluctant parents.

**JIM REID**

I think it's very important that parents feel welcome at the school. I think it's very important that they feel that, if there's an issue comes up at school, that they can approach the school, and that the school will deal with it sensitively and sympathetically, and that they know that the school is there for them. Part of the barriers for some parents is their own preconceived ideas of school, and those are formed in many ways by their own experiences of school. We often have parents come in to school and say, this was my old primary school and I remember such-and-such a teacher, and they generally speak in quite positive terms, but we do get the odd one or two who won't see school in that light, so that's one barrier. I think another barrier might well be a confidence factor as well, that you know they don't feel that they can contribute well. Parents can certainly contribute in a whole host of ways to the school life and we'd like to break that one down.

**GAIL BEDFORD**

We have several staff within the school that have developed a focus, an educational link focus, for community, and they are in the playground, they're at the gate, they talk with parents, they encourage. They invite them to do something that that they feel perhaps is non-threatening. We use pots and pots of tea. I phone parents, I'll write to parents on a personal basis. The tone that I try always to take is informal, chatty, again non-threatening. Because for many of the parents who don't make the step over the door, it's because perhaps their experience hasn't been a good educational experience. And they have a memory of what it was like for them, and what we're trying to say is 'this is an open door, this is somewhere you're very welcome, and what we're all wanting to do is to work together for the benefit of each child'.

**RONNIE FLYNN**

Not all parents are willing to be involved, but those who do participate stress the rewards.

**PARENT**

The school wants people, wants parents involved in their children's education. The school goes out of their way to invite parents in, but some parents are a bit frightened, maybe they've had a bad school experience themselves, and they don't want to come anywhere near a school, they don't realise how much it has changed.

**PARENT**

I would say, go along and get involved, your child will benefit, you'll benefit. It makes you much closer to your child and the children think it's great that their mum or dad's coming in to help, and you know, it's good for them as much as it is for you.

**PARENT**

All I can say is, coming into the school has really boosted my confidence. Made me a more positive person, a better person. I don't feel frightened of coming in.

**PARENT**

I do think from that working parents' point of view, you know, that there is a gap, because they can't always come into school to help.

**PARENT**

I think from their own experiences as children at school, perhaps that's put them off, if they had an unhappy childhood at school, that might put them off coming into school and doing something as a parent, or as an adult helper at all.

**PARENT**

And some of them are not confident in their own abilities and they feel that if they come to school, it might show up any weaknesses they've got, which is not the case because any parent who comes to school is not judged on their ability, only with the time and what they can give to the school.

**RONNIE FLYNN**

Most of the people interviewed agreed that parental involvement needed to be fostered at an early stage, particularly when the child begins school. Glenlee use a home visit approach.

**YVONNE CHAPMAN**

We visit parents at home and try to kind of break down that barrier and have a one to one with parents in their territory which is very important. Welcoming them into school, involving them in different activities but enjoyable activities. We'd normally send a letter as part of our parented programme, we'd like to come and visit you at your home, and tell your child all the different things that are going to happen at school. So we would go along, we would take a parenting pack, which would consist of activities that, maybe a small book, a pair of scissors, colouring crayons, colouring activities for the child. And this is a present from this school, to the child. And we would talk with the child, we would maybe read them a story, we would speak with the parent, we would let them know about all the different workshops, and all the different open afternoons we maybe have. So it's that, you know you get to know the person face-to-face, you get to know their first name, they get to know your first name. So it's really building up a personal kind of relationship.

**RONNIE FLYNN**

But support doesn't stop there. It is carried on throughout the years. Glenlee parents again.

**PARENT**

They do a number of workshops before and after the child actually comes into the school. It's quite informative. They sort of show you what they're coming in to, the things that they're going to learn in their first year. The workshops I think are excellent, because again it teaches you the way the child is going to be taught, the way they write, you know, the way they form their letters and everything, so that you're not teaching them the wrong way to do it at home. I found that was a great bonus.

**PARENT**

It's good for the kids as well because it gets them used to coming into the school before they actually start. The workshops that they do involve the kids and the parents. The workshops do deal with their maths, their phonics, their sound, everything, everything that they're going to learn in their first year, the workshops cover. Parents are invited along, it's up to each individual parent whether they come along, if they don't come along they'll, they've missed out.

**RONNIE FLYNN**

Finally, parents and grandparents at Mount Pleasant reinforce why continued support is needed.

**PARENT**

If it's your first child coming to school you don't know the procedures, you don't know what to expect, and sometimes if you've actually had no contact with any other parents you're faced with other problems, you're faced with a social problem of mixing with adults again and talking in the play ground and your children mixing with other children of the same age.

**PARENT**

I think you're as frightened as your son actually, starting school! I mean they've got fears of like starting school and I think you fear for them and it's all a strange environment to you, until you, you know until you actually get into the school, and that you know the workings of the school.

**RONNIE FLYNN**

Annette and Merinisha have been providing short-term care for over two years. Both find the relationship with the parents very important.

**ANNETTE**

I find that from the beginning I get a feeling whether or not the links gonna work if I get on with the parents, and I've always, you know, left it that they can come and visit me whenever they want or, you know they can, even when the child is with me they can come around to see the child, see if they're all right or anything, and usually I have got quite a good relationship with them because I have, I have done that, and I find actually that they almost kind of become friends, because you know, you work very closely together because obviously they want to know you because you're looking after their child and, you know, you're obviously they have to come round your whole house and see if they like it, so they have to be comfortable with me and I have to be, I feel that I have to be comfortable with them too, and that way we work quite closely together.

It's nice that I've been able to make relationships with the children's parents and be on the same level as them, and feel that I know the child almost as well as their parents do and that they trust me, that they can leave their child with me and not worry, not have to phone or anything.

**MERENISHA**

I'm proud of my work, and you know the parents like me, parents like to send them with me only. I'm proud of that because when I go to parents' house they are so surprised, because I keep that girl for two months and she become a chubby girl, her mum said 'oh my daughter is very gone heavy and the chubbies and going, her cheeks and everything is red' and she said 'oh you've been looking after her very well'. I'm proud of myself that thinks I've been doing very well.