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Parental involvement in their children's learning

February 2006

Introduction

What difference does it make and what makes the difference?

The importance of parental involvement in children's education is well evidenced. The Government's recent Every Child Matters Agenda has acknowledged this. But how much difference does parental involvement make and what kind of involvement makes the difference?

This month, the Research of the Month (RoM) team have summarised a literature review of studies that explored the impact of parental involvement on children's educational progress and strategies for enhancing their involvement. The study is:

Desforges, C., & Abouchar, A. (2003) The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: a review of the literature. (DfES RR433)

The review established that parental involvement has a significant positive effect on children's achievement, and that the kind of involvement that makes the most difference is the conversations parents have with their children at home. The review emphasised that parent-child conversations in the home are more valuable, in terms of enhancing pupil achievement, than parents' involvement in school activities. This does not mean that traditional activities, such as parents helping in the classroom and meeting with teachers at school have no value – there may be lots of indirect benefits of such contact, and in any case, such contact can be directly geared to encouraging and supporting parents in talking with their children about their learning at home. It is just that on their own they cannot be linked with achievement in the evidence available to date.

We have found this RoM more challenging to write than others. Creating RoM features from research reviews is always difficult because of the complexity and range of the data. But this is challenging in another way. The study's findings have meant we have not been able to focus on activities that take place in school. Nevertheless, the powerful findings that call us to reflect on our current practices make this an important study for us to wrestle with.

In this RoM we examine the evidence relating to the difference parents can make to their children's learning – in particular through parent-child conversations. We also look at reasons why some parents don't get involved at home as much as they might (because for example, they do not know how they can help) and explore ways of fostering

parental involvement (such as, setting interactive homework that is specifically designed to encourage children to talk with adults at home).

We think the research summary will increase practitioners' understanding of the importance of trying to involve parents in more extended and meaningful conversations with their children, whilst the case studies offer some practical suggestions for ways of increasing parents' involvement. The RoM also discusses how the review's findings about parental involvement might be used to inform attempts at closing the social class achievement gap.

The study

What kind of parental involvement helps the most?

The researchers found that the term 'parental involvement' encompasses a number of quite different forms of activity – some which take place at home and some at school. Activities that parents involve themselves in at home include:

- * talking with their children
- * enhancing their child's self-esteem
- * modelling social and educational aspirations and values
- * monitoring out of school activities (supervising homework etc).

Activities parents participate in at school include:

- * attending events, such as open days and school fairs
- * working in the school in support of teachers (for example, helping with activities in the classroom, on trips and with sports activities)
- * assisting in the governance of the school
- * meeting with teachers to discuss their children's progress etc.

The review found that, of all these activities, the most important for enhancing pupil achievement, are the conversations and discussions parents have with their children at home.

This finding is consistent with the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. He pointed out the importance of talking, particularly the dialogue that occurs when an adult assists a child to solve problems in his/her 'zone of proximal development' (defined as the difference between what people achieve by themselves and what they can achieve with the assistance from a more skilled person). Vygotsky believed that learning occurred in this zone and that social learning leads to cognitive development. Practitioners may like to read about his theory and see examples of adult-child interactions that help children learn, in our RoM 'Social interaction as a means of constructing learning'.

What difference does parental involvement at home make to pupil achievement?

The reviewers found many studies which showed that parental involvement at home has a large and positive effect on pupil achievement. Strikingly, at primary level, the impact of such parental involvement on pupil achievement is much bigger than the impact schools have, but by KS4, the impact on achievement is less than the school. By this stage, the impact of parental involvement is more in terms of influencing staying on rates and pupils' educational aspirations than in terms of achievement.

The table below (from Sacker et al) shows the difference in effect size of the impact of parents and schools on pupil achievement. (N.B. Effect sizes of 0.3 or less are generally considered to be small.)

Age

Parents

School

7 years

0.29

0.05

11 years

0.27

0.21

16 years

0.14

0.51

The reviewers also found that the effect of parental involvement at home – in particular the discussions and conversations parents have with their children – was stronger than that of either socio-economic status or parents' level of education. Whilst learning related provision in the home was generally higher in higher social class homes, there are parents low on SES and qualifications who also provide a learning home environment.

Practitioners may like to reflect on a case study (no. 1) that shows the power of the home as a learning environment. It also reveals that the kind of conversations children engage in with adults at home are quite different to the kinds of conversations children engage in with adults at school.

Why is parents' involvement at home so important?

The reviewers found that the broad answer to why parents' involvement at home is so important seemed to depend on the age of the child. For younger children, 'at home' parenting provides the child with a context to gain school-related skills (such as reading and counting) along with opportunities to develop qualities of motivation and self-worth. For older pupils, the parenting role is more about motivating their child and modelling aspirations than helping with specific skills. We outline the findings of two of the studies included in the review to illustrate these different effects.

Early years

'The Effective Provision of Pre School Education (EPPE) Project' (Sylva et al) tracked the attainment and development of around 3,000 children between the ages of 3 and 7 years. The researchers found that parents who engaged in learning activities with their children at home (such as, reading to them, singing songs and nursery rhymes, and playing with letters and numbers) helped reduce the risk of special educational needs (SEN). Practitioners can find out about the EPPE findings in more detail in our earlier RoMs, 'Researching effective pedagogy in the early years' and 'Effective provision of pre-school education'.

Adolescents

Several studies showed that parental involvement had less influence on the achievement of older pupils, but parental involvement was important nevertheless. For example, Catsambis found that parental involvement was not associated with academic progress with 14-18 year olds. However, their involvement increased the likelihood of their child continuing with their education and choosing challenging course options. High levels of parental expectation, consistent encouragement and actions that aimed to enhance learning opportunities in the home were all positively associated with students' high aspirations and college enrolments.

Practitioners may like to read a case study that reports how some teachers set about enhancing parents' involvement with primary and secondary aged children at home, and the activities they used as talking points, such as taking photos and collecting artefacts.

Practitioners may also like to read a case study we featured in our earlier RoM about the EPPE pre-school project, which describes an activity designed for pre-school children and their parents to talk about at home.

Why do some parents get more involved in their child's learning than others?

The research literature showed large variations in the extent to which parents were involved in their child's learning. For example, a survey of parents of children aged 5-16 (Williams et al) found 29% of parents felt very involved (more in primary than secondary schools, and more mothers than fathers), whilst 35% felt strongly they would like to be more involved. On this and the following page, we look at findings from several studies included in the review that explored factors that affect levels of parental involvement, whilst the case study section gives examples of strategies designed to tackle some of the problems.

Socio-economic status

An American study (Sui-Chu and Willms) which collected questionnaire data from around 24,600 students aged 14 years from 1,500 schools found that the higher the social class, the more likely the parents were involved in the children's education. The parents:

- * discussed school activities with their children
- * monitored children's out of school activities
- * contacted school staff
- * volunteered for school activities and attended school functions.

Level of education

Kohl et al found the more educated the parent, the greater their involvement in their child's education. Having a more limited educational experience meant that some parents lacked the relevant skills to get involved. Practitioners may like to read a case study (no. 3) of a school that set out to enhance parents' knowledge of how they could support their children with mathematics homework to give them the confidence to play a greater part in their child's education.

Parents' view of their role

Williams et al found that 2% of parents felt the responsibility for education belonged wholly to the school, whilst 58% believed they had at least equal responsibility. The remaining 40% were presumably somewhere in between. The reviewers reached the inevitable conclusion that the parents' view of who is responsible for their child's education shapes their view about what they feel is important or necessary for them to do. Practitioners may like to read a case study (4) of a school that helped parents to see the active part they could play in their child's learning at home.

How do pupils affect the level of their parents' involvement?

The review found that the children themselves also have the potential to promote or discourage parental involvement in their learning. On this page we explore how children can affect the level of their parents' involvement and give a case study example of a strategy designed to encourage children to involve their parents.

A study of 872 Canadian students aged 14-15 years (Deslandes and Cloutier) for example, found that students were generally positive about asking their parents to help them with their schoolwork:

- * 60% would ask their parents to listen to them read something they had written
- * 86% would invite parents to assist with ideas for a project
- * 66% would work with parents to improve their grades.

Another study (Edwards and Alldred) of 70 children aged 10 and 14 years, showed how although some children promote parent involvement, others discourage it.

Promoting parental involvement

Children who actively promoted parental involvement might, for example, spontaneously tell their parents about the school day or ask for help with schoolwork. Their motives seemed to be to do with wanting their parents' company rather than wanting to advance their achievement. Children who were passive about promoting parental involvement 'went along' with parental activity – for example, they 'did not mind' parents offering to help and they responded when asked about the school day.

Discouraging parental involvement

Children who discouraged, evaded or obstructed parental involvement often did so because they felt their parents

were 'too busy' or 'not the type'. They might block home-school connections by, for example, dumping school notes or newsletters or censoring discussions of 'bad days at school'. Sometimes pupils felt they did not need parental involvement because, for example, they saw it as their own responsibility to do their homework.

Whether children promoted or discouraged parental involvement largely depended upon their gender, their age and their social class:

- * girls supported parental involvement more actively than boys
- * secondary school students were less comfortable with parental involvement than primary aged pupils
- * middle class children were more inclined to go along with the idea of parental involvement than working class children, who were either more likely to initiate involvement (mainly girls) or block it (mainly boys).

Practitioners may like to read a case study (no. 5) that shows how setting 'interactive' homework (tasks that had a clear role for parents) increased the amount of time parents spent supporting their child's learning.

What strategies have helped vulnerable children and their parents?

Children from families suffering from material deprivation or whose parents suffer from ill health or depression etc are particularly at risk. The reviewers reported on family and community education programmes specifically designed to provide guidance and help for such families. Although many of these programmes tend to take place away from school settings, there is plenty of scope for input from teachers and schools, particularly now that schools and other agencies are expected to work more closely together under the Every Child Matters agenda. One example the reviewers gave was of a Family Literacy scheme which comprised:

- * joint parent/child sessions on supporting reading skills
- * early literacy teaching for young children
- * accredited basic skills instruction for parents.

The programme was targeted at parents who were illiterate or semi illiterate and designed to engage the parents and their children aged 3-6 years jointly in learning at home. The children were given intensive teaching whilst the parents worked on their own literacy and learned how to help their children.

The programme was evaluated through statistical analysis as well as perception data. By the end of the programme, parents and children had made statistically significant advances in achievement in reading and writing:

- * at the start of the programme, 67% of the children had low levels of achievement that would cause them to struggle at school. This proportion fell to 35% by the end of the programme and the gains were sustained nine months later
- * there were also significant boosts to parental achievement, to their confidence and to their confidence in helping their child, and these gains were sustained two years later.

Furthermore, teachers rated the classroom behaviour of the Family Literacy children as better than the behaviour of their peers and the children received more support from their families. They also considered the children as equal to their peers in other academic and motivational respects.

We described another effective family education programme, 'The Peers Early Education Partnership' (PEEP) in the case study section of our RoM about the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project.

What other strategies have been tried?

Some programmes have focused on other issues, such as improving children's behaviour and family attitudes towards

school. For example, the reviewers reported examples of parenting programmes. In one such programme, single mothers on low incomes or state benefits who had been referred by social services attended a 90-minute session every week for six weeks. Social workers trained the mothers how to use behavioural techniques, and the mothers practiced the techniques through role-play. After the course, the children's behaviour problems were reduced. So too was parental depression. Furthermore, improved child behaviour was still evident six months later.

Other programmes have encompassed everyone involved in the child's schooling, including headteachers, school staff, children and parents. In one such programme, home/school links workers (HSLW) aimed to help parents whose own experience of schooling may have made them negative and unconfident when dealing with their children's schools. Their responsibilities included:

- * establishing contact and building relationships with families
- * working with families to improve attendance
- * helping parents to support their children's learning.

The project reported a number of achievements, including:

- * better communication between families and schools
- * more parents coming forward to seek help and support
- * improvement in parents' understanding of school issues
- * better understanding on the part of teachers of family situations.

Whilst there is no evidence that these kinds of programmes have a direct impact on pupil achievement, they may help parents feel more comfortable about approaching school and more willing to play a part in their children's education.

How might we use research about parental involvement to inform attempts to close the social class achievement gap?

The studies in the review consistently showed that parental involvement has a large and positive effect on children's achievement and engagement. Consequently, the reviewers argued, if the involvement of lower SES parents in their children's learning at home could be enhanced, very significant advances in school achievement might reasonably be expected. The reviewers concluded that schools could enhance parental involvement, but they recognised that the challenge is multidimensional. The studies showed there are many different barriers to parental involvement. Therefore an initiative to enhance parental involvement would need to tackle the problems faced by some parents, including:

- * the effects of extreme poverty
- * the effects of substance abuse and domestic violence
- * the effects of depression
- * lack of confidence in, or knowledge about, how to support their child's learning
- * the impact of inappropriate values and beliefs
- * the impact of the difficult child.

Some parents will need help with all these issues, whilst others will need selective support. The reviewers commented on how so far, initiatives have attempted to deal with each of these challenges separately – that there seems to have been no initiative that has attempted to manage all the issues simultaneously and they suggested the way forward might be an approach which includes strategies to deal with all the identified issues. This may be a less daunting prospect than it might have been until very recently, when the introduction of the Every Child Matters agenda created an environment in which schools are expected to collaborate with other professionals involved in children's

development, such as social workers and health professionals.

How was the review conducted?

The authors of this interpretative review searched databases (such as Education-Line and the British Education Index) and websites (including the DfES, LEA websites and the Electronic Journals service) using seven key terms, for relevant studies published between 1990 and 2003. They also collected material recommended by experts in the field from the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia.

The reviewers identified two types of research:

- * studies that examined the impact of naturally occurring parental involvement on children's educational outcomes
- * studies that evaluated interventions designed to enhance levels of parental involvement.

The reviewers outlined some of the strengths and weaknesses of the studies they reported upon, but did not indicate what criteria they used for including or excluding studies (as systematic reviews do).

Naturally occurring parental involvement

The reviewers considered that recent research on naturally occurring parental involvement was sound because the studies:

- * involved large samples of parents, children and schools
- * made objective measures of involvement and impact
- * used statistical techniques to test assumptions about the relationship of causes and effects between the process of involvement and their educational impact.

The studies were consistent about the processes involved and the scale of the impact.

Intervention programmes

The research on interventions programmes by contrast, was technically much weaker because:

- * samples were typically very small
- * evaluations were often subjective, after the event and usually did not refer to comparison groups.

Because this was an interpretative review and because the reviewers themselves noted technical weaknesses in the intervention programme data, it was not possible for them to draw conclusions about the causes and effects of the intervention programmes, although they argued that this did not necessarily indicate that they were ineffective.

What are the implications of this study?

This review investigated how parents influence children's achievement at school. It found that the single most important factor is their involvement at home and specifically, the conversations they have with their children.

Teachers may like to consider the following implications:

- * Could you do more to promote conversations between children and their parents at home, through, for example, asking children to collect artefacts or take photos at home to bring into school or setting interactive homework activities specifically designed to involve parents? (Case studies 2 and 5 could provide useful starting points).
- * Could you do more to build on the conversations that take place at home between parents and their children? Would

it be helpful to share ideas with your colleagues for ways of doing this? (Case study 1, which highlights the difference between adult-child conversations at home and school, could provide a useful starting point).

* Could you do more to monitor whether the strategies you use to increase parental involvement at home contribute to increased pupil learning, and share with parents evidence of the impact of their efforts?

School leaders may like to consider the following implications:

* Could you do more to raise your colleagues' awareness of the importance of parental involvement at home throughout their children's schooling and give them the opportunity to share ideas about ways they might promote conversations between parents and their children?

* The review highlighted how some parents don't see it as their role to get involved, whilst others don't know how to support their child's learning at home. Could your school provide opportunities, such as workshops and discussion groups for parents and carers to see how children learn particular subjects at school, to help them see ways they can help their children at home and the importance of doing so? (Case study 3 could provide a useful starting point).

* The reviewers recognised that the challenge of enhancing parental involvement in vulnerable children's learning is likely to be multidimensional. Could you do more to engage with other agencies, such as the educational welfare service, children's social services, youth offending teams and voluntary organisations, such as Childline, Kidscape and NSPCC, or become more actively involved in initiatives in your area designed to tackle the severe problems faced by some families?

Filling in the gaps

Gaps that are uncovered in a piece of research have a useful role in making sure that future research builds cumulatively on what is known. But research also needs to inform practice, so practitioners' interpretation of the gaps and follow-up questions are crucial. We think three kinds of studies would usefully supplement the findings of the review:

* studies that evaluate the effectiveness of multi-agency approaches designed to increase parental involvement by targeting many of the problems faced by some parents

* robust studies designed to evaluate the impact of individual parental involvement initiatives on pupil achievement

* case studies of school initiatives designed to promote parents' involvement in their child's learning that are part of the whole school focus on enhancing learning, at both primary and secondary level.

What is your experience?

Do you have any evidence about initiatives aimed at enhancing parental involvement at home? Do you have action research or enquiry based development programmes running that explore, for example the effects of setting interactive homework or training parents how to support their children, on pupil achievement? We would be interested to hear about examples of effective activities, which we could perhaps feature in our case study section.

Your feedback

Have you found this study to be useful? Have you used any aspect of this research in your own classroom teaching practice? We would like to hear your feedback on this study. Click on the link below to share your views with us.
research@gtce.org.uk

References

We list below the full reference details for the individual studies from the review, which we have included in our RoM summary.

Catsambis, S. (2001) 'Expanding knowledge of parental involvement in children's secondary education: connections

with high schools seniors' academic success', *Social Psychology of Education*, 5, pp.149-177

Deslandes, R., & Cloutier (2002) 'Adolescents perceptions of parental involvement in schooling'. *School Psychology International*, 23 (2) pp. 220-232

Kohl, G.O. et al (2000) 'Parent involvement in school: conceptualizing multiple dimensions and their relations with family and demographic risk factors', *Journal of School Psychology*, 38 (6), pp.501-523

Sacker et al (2002) 'Social inequality in educational inequality in educational achievement and psychological adjustment throughout childhood: magnitude and mechanisms', *Social Science and Medicine*, 55, pp.863-880

Sui-Chu, E.H. and Willms, J.D. (1996) 'Effects of parental involvement on eight-grade achievements', *Sociology of Education*, 69 (2), 126-141

Sylva K. et al (1999) 'Characteristics of the EPPE Project sample at entry to the study', *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: technical paper 2*; London: University of London, Institute of Education

Williams, B. et al (2002) *Parental involvement in education (RR332)* London: DfES

Case studies

The case studies we have chosen share the same focus – the power of the home as a learning environment and the importance of parent-child conversations. The first case study looks at the kind of conversations young children have at home with their mothers and explores the difference between young children's conversations at home and their conversations with adults at school. The remaining four case studies show strategies for enhancing the extent and quality of parents' involvement at home – in particular the conversations they have with their children – through increasing parents' confidence and knowledge.

Case study 1: Young children talking at home and school

We chose this case study because it shows the power of the home as a learning environment and how learning at home is achieved through conversations. The study compared the conversations between children and adults that took place at nursery school and at home. It found that whilst the children took part in long, sustained discussions at home, they were likely to be subdued at school, taking a more passive role in conversations. This difference was particularly pronounced for working-class children. The researchers warned that it would be easy to misjudge such children – faced with an inarticulate child in the classroom, teachers might easily conclude that the child interacts little and at a low level at home too.

The study focused on thirty young children who had all been at nursery school (part-time) for at least one term. All the children were girls because they were considered more likely to talk more, and more clearly, than boys of this age. Half the girls were from working-class families and half were from middle-class families. They were observed for one afternoon at home with their mother and two mornings at nursery school. All of the conversations the children had

with adults during these times were recorded. The researchers made transcripts of individual conversations and calculated the number and length of the conversations that were held, and the number of questions that were asked, etc. The length of the conversations was measured by the number of 'turns' contributed by the participants. For example, the following conversation consists of three turns:

Mother: Come here, please.

Child: In a minute.

Mother: No, come right away.

The children's conversations at home

On average, the children held twenty-seven conversations an hour with their mothers and each lasted, on average sixteen turns. Their conversations ranged over a variety of topics, such as information about the family, the colour, size, shape and number of objects, and general knowledge covering history and science topics, etc. During these conversations, the children asked their mothers a very large number of questions – on average twenty-six an hour. For example, they asked questions about the shape of roofs and chairs, why the Queen doesn't always wear a crown and why boats sink. The conversations took place in a variety of situations – whilst the children were playing or reading, having lunch or out on shopping expeditions. What was apparent in many of the conversations was that the children were actively struggling to understand a new idea, or some information which did not fit in with what they already knew, or the meaning of an unfamiliar word, etc.

The children's conversations at nursery school

At nursery school, on average, the children took part in ten conversations an hour with staff and they lasted on average eight turns – half as many as at home. These findings are unsurprising because of the higher ratio of children to adults in school and because children spend much of their time playing with other children, or on their own. But the children's conversations with their teachers contrasted sharply with those they had with their mothers in other ways too – the richness, depth and variety were missing. So too was the sense of intellectual struggle. When talking to their teachers, the children were more subdued. They asked fewer questions (half the children asked only five questions and three children asked no questions at all). Few of these questions were 'curiosity' (why?) questions. The children's conversations with adults at school were mainly restricted to answering questions rather than asking them, or taking part in minimal exchanges about, for example, the whereabouts of other children and craft materials.

Examples of conversations

The study reported two conversations involving the same child (Donna – a working class girl) which illustrate the differences found in the conversations between children and adults at home and at school. Whilst cleaning her house, Donna's mother started to tell Donna about a dog at the pub where she worked:

Donna: Does he bite you?

Mother: No, he likes to play. Threw his bowl at me this morning.

Donna: Why?

Mother: 'Cause he wanted some tea, and that was his way of telling me he wanted some tea.

Donna: Does he say 'two teas'?

Mother: No, dogs can't talk, love.

Donna: What do they say?

Mother: They bark.

Donna: How?

Mother: Went 'woof woof' [pretends to bark].

Donna: 'woof woof'

Mother: 'woof woof'

Donna: 'woof woof'

Mother: Then he picked his bowl up with his teeth and he went 'Oogh!' Then he dropped it on the floor, right in front of me there. And I said to him, 'Do you want some tea?' And he went, 'woof'. So I got the bowl and gave him some tea.

Donna: You didn't! [Laughs]

Mother: I did! He doesn't have sugar in his tea, though ... just the milk and tea.

Donna: How do doggies drink tea then?

Mother: He has it in a bowl and he licks it with his tongue. Like Auntie Doris's cat when it licks his milk up.

Donna: Oh, like a cat.

Mother: Like a cat.

This next conversation took place at nursery school. Donna was playing with the sand. One of the other children was pretending to make 'apple pie' out of the sand and Donna said she was too:

Donna: So I

Staff: You're making apple pie as well. Ooh, I shall have to have some then, 'cause I love apple pie. [Donna pushed her full bucket towards the teacher]

Donna: Here's some

Staff: What's this? [No reply]

Staff: Is that apple pie and custard? [Donna nodded]

Staff: Ooh I love apple pie and custard. Ooh that's beautiful. [She pretended to eat] You have a piece? [She offers Donna the bucket and Donna pretends to eat some]

Donna: I'm making some more now.

Staff: You're making some more? What you gonna make this time?

Donna: Some more apple pie and custard.

Staff: Some more apple pie and custard?

Donna: Yes.

Reference:

Tizard, B. & Hughes, M. (1984) *Young Children Learning: Talking and Thinking at Home and at School*. London: Fontana

Case study 2: Using questionnaire data to find out ways of increasing parental involvement at home

We chose this case study because it shows ways some teachers set about enhancing parents' involvement in their children's learning at home. The research project took place in 16 schools (primary and secondary) located in inner city and suburban settings in Bristol and Cardiff. The teacher researchers investigated the views of parents, teachers and headteachers about existing home-school practices through parent questionnaires, parent focus groups, and interviews with head teachers, senior staff and class teachers. They used the evidence they collected to inform intervention strategies.

Schools

Whilst teachers believed home-school partnerships were important, they appeared less clear of the role home played in the partnership. Most communication went only in the direction of from school to home and tended to be in the form of written communication:

* the kind of information primary teachers asked for from parents was narrow and focused on the school curriculum, for example, how much reading/writing pupils did at home

* secondary schools tended to ask parents to ensure homework was completed and uniform rules were adhered to.

* many schools sent a written newsletter out in only one language even though their school catered for pupils from different community backgrounds.

Parents

Although welcoming this kind of general information about school, parents suggested they would find it helpful to be given more specific and focused information on their individual child or child's class etc and wanted communication to be more frequent and informal. They felt that more regular contact than the traditional open evenings, would stop issues building up and allow information of a different kind to be exchanged. For example, they suggested:

'It would be helpful if we knew more about what they're doing – say on a monthly basis'.

'Having a sheet at the end of each week, briefly noting the areas covered'.

As children grew older, communication between home and school appeared to diminish and parents became less sure of their role. Generally, parents regretted that the close links they had enjoyed with the primary school no longer seemed possible with the secondary school. One parent commented:

'I want to stay involved, but I don't know how'.

Another wanted 'anything to give me some idea of what's going on'.

Reflecting on this evidence led the research teams to consider strategies that might address these concerns. They devised a variety of interventions that both fostered discussion at home and enhanced parents' knowledge about ways they could help their children with their learning.

Photographs

A Year 1 teacher in Bristol gave her class disposable cameras to take photographs at home that linked to a science topic on plants and growth. The photographs also showed aspects of family life, for example, pets and visits etc. The photographs were used as a basis for a writing workshop, to which parents and siblings were invited to participate. In another school, Year 4 children were asked to bring photographs to school that recorded mathematical activities they had taken part in during the holidays.

Artefacts

One teacher asked every child to fill a shoebox with items they thought would motivate their writing. Parents were asked to discuss the children's choices at home. The contents of the boxes were used in a variety of ways, including oral presentations to the class and story writing.

Video

Videos were used to give parents a view of life in some schools. For example, pupils produced videos for parents, which illustrated methods they had been taught in school to aid mental calculations. In another school, a video of "A Day in the Life of a Year 7" was made and shown to year 6 children and their parents. The video acted as a springboard for discussion about their imminent move from primary to secondary school.

The teachers valued taking part in the project and some indicated that the interventions had changed their view about

the importance of parental involvement at home and how they could encourage it:

'I'm more aware now of what I should be doing, what I could do to help them [parents]'

'This project has been good because it's given you practical ways [to involve parents]'

Reference:

Salway, L., Scanlan, M., & Stinchcombe, V. (2004) Exchanging knowledge between home and school to raise attainment. National Teacher Research Panel (2004) Available at:
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp/lib/word/BurkeScanlanSalwayandStinc.doc> (PDF Accessed 11 July 2005)

Case study 3: Increasing parents' knowledge about how pupils are taught mathematics in the primary school

We chose this case study because it is an example of how a school informed parents about ways of helping their children with homework. The mathematics co-ordinator at a community primary school felt that parents with children entering Year 6 would benefit from being made more aware of the mathematics their children were expected to achieve and how they could support their child at home. The school ran three sessions to help parents understand how they might participate with their children in mathematics in a non-threatening and supportive way: an evening meeting to explain school working practices and two daytime workshops when the parents worked on mathematics tasks with their children.

The evening meeting

In the first part of the evening meeting, staff explained to parents how and why the Numeracy Strategy had been introduced and the way it worked. They explained how the Numeracy Strategy put a strong emphasis on a range of calculations, that mental mathematics had a high profile and that there was more problem solving, thinking and talking in lessons with the result of less recording. Handouts were provided on the objectives for the year with examples of mathematics activities. The staff also explained about homework times and their expectations of the children. The second part of the meeting was informal with opportunities for parents to try out some Year 6 activities and discuss their methods and any homework issues with the teachers.

First workshop

The first workshop aimed to promote children and parents working together at mathematics. The session began with the children working in class on a 'measure' activity whilst the parents worked together in another room on a task requiring them to share their knowledge of different types of 'measures'. The parents then did a measuring task with their own child in class. This activity contributed to a whole group graph that compared a person's height to the area of their footprint. The plenary focused on interpreting the graph.

Second workshop

Parents were invited to take part in a problem solving session with their children. The children worked in friendship groups. Parents could circulate the groups or join in with a single group – they could choose to observe, prompt or join in. The atmosphere was informal – a fun session – but the children were asked to reflect on the strategies they used.

Issues which parents raised during the project included:

* knowing which method to use to help their child (they found it reassuring to know that their methods were acceptable along with many others)

- * wanting a fallback of written instructions if the child could not explain what the homework involved
- * not wanting a lot of written homework at the weekends because it was sometimes difficult to complete homework as children were visiting relatives etc
- * wanting to match the school method of learning times tables at home
- * coping with different teachers' styles as their child moved from class to class
- * sometimes experiencing tension between what their child wanted to do when s/he got home and the need to ensure homework was completed (15 minutes duration appeared to be agreeable)
- * wanting a mixture of shared and independent homework tasks as there was not always someone available to play a game.

Twelve children were also interviewed in groups of four. Issues raised by the children included:

- * higher achieving children preferred puzzles and problems for homework, whilst those who found mathematics more difficult preferred 'sums'
 - * most of the children felt that homework intruded into their out of school free time
 - * most of the children felt that there was someone at home that they could ask for help with mathematics homework (either their parents, siblings, grandparents or friends), but some children worked entirely on their own at home.
- The teachers, parents and pupils all appeared to benefit from the initiative. The children gained from working with parents in a school setting. The school was able to promote school working processes with the parents and learned much from the parents about homework. Parents learned about what their child would be doing in school and gained reassurance about their own ways of calculating. They also felt their contributions were valued – a feature the school considered an important part of their 'partnership' with parents.

Reference:

Sangster, M. (2004) Parents and mathematics in the primary school. British Society for Research into Learning Mathematics (BSRLM) 24 (2) pp.99-105. Proceedings a one day conference held at Leeds University, 12th June 2004. Available at: <http://www.bsrlm.org.uk/IPs/ip24-2/BSRLM-IP-24-2-16.pdf> (PDF Accessed 11 July 2005)

Case study 4: Developing positive parental self-esteem to support children's learning

We chose this case study because it is an example of a project designed to help parents see that they could play an effective role in their child's learning. The project took place in a middle school that had around 400 pupils on roll, of whom 95% were from the local Asian community. Many pupils entered school with a reading age well below average. The school undertook their 'parent partnership project' in response to:

- * staff concerns about the lack of visible parental involvement
- * recognition that some parents felt unable to support their child
- * the views of some pupils that their parents could not help them because they were not fluent speakers and readers of English.

To begin with, the school wrote a letter (available in several languages) to all families of pupils in Years 5 and 6, inviting them to take part in an 'exciting partnership' designed to help improve their child's reading and enjoyment of books. Around 50 parents (35% of the key stage cohort) responded to the letter. Teachers, helped by a bilingual member of staff, interviewed these parents and their children in school, in their home or in a local community centre. The interviews explored:

- * opportunities in the home for reading and learning

* what parents needed from school to help them support their children

* how the school and parents might work together.

The teachers found that the majority of parents did not believe that they could have a role to play in their child's learning because they were unable to read and write in English themselves. The school also found that although parents said they were satisfactorily informed about their child's progress, in reality they had little understanding of the actual processes.

The school decided to organise gatherings in the parents' homes – inviting groups of mothers to look at a wide range of books to try to increase their ability and confidence to share and explore books with their children. The school identified several key households to work with and as targets for establishing good relationships. Then the school borrowed a large selection of books from the schools library service. At each book session, three members of school staff, including a bilingual member of staff, sat with a group of mothers, and looked at and discussed the books. Ten gatherings were arranged in total, attended by around 100 parents. The school also produced a partnership project newsletter that contained information about books suitable for Year 5 and 6 pupils that could be bought at local bookshops or borrowed from the library as well as about school events, and school staff took several groups of parents on a library visit.

By the end of the project:

* the school had an improved relationship with Asian parents – many Asian parents had been involved in a dialogue about using books and supporting children's learning

* parents had become more actively involved in their child's school education – attendance at school meetings and consultations increased from 25% to 50% and more parents came into school to ask questions

* attendance had improved – the number and length of visits the children made abroad during term time was reduced

* parents had improved their knowledge and understanding about using books – they learnt how the school used books, how to use books themselves with their children and how to use the library

* pupils' library use had increased

* staff had gained greater insight into the limits of pupils' home literacy and the parents' need for information and practical support

* pupil performance in the end of key stage tests had improved by 17% in English, 10% in mathematics and 27% in science over the previous year.

The school felt that a number of factors contributed to the success of the project, including:

* women gathering at each others' homes for a "women's" event was a traditional activity and therefore not threatening

* being in a large group with a common language helped the women feel less threatened by their lack of English

* the rolling programme meant that a large number of staff could be involved.

Reference:

Offord, J. (1998) The Highfield parent partnership project. Copies of the report are available from Bradford Education, Flockton House, Flockton Road, Bradford BD4 7RY

Case study 5: Involving parents through interactive homework

We chose this case study because it shows the benefit of setting homework that has a clear role for parents. The researchers of this study set out to investigate whether reading homework designed to be interactive between children and parents would increase parental involvement and also improve pupil achievement. They followed the progress of 84 children aged 7-8 years in three schools over four weeks. In the first school, children were given 20 interactive

homework activities and the children's parents were trained how to help their children with the activities. In the second school, the children were only given the interactive homework activities, whilst the children in the third school were given their usual homework.

The interactive homework activities were designed to help parents ask their children appropriate questions about the texts they read. Following their discussions with their parents, the pupils were expected to write about their inferences in a journal.

The parents' training focused on six key areas:

- * parent-child vocabulary study
- * how to act as tutors whilst their child read
- * focal points for discussions after the child had read
- * key points to look for in analysing pupil inference-making
- * how to complete the parent checklist of behaviours
- * key points to note about their child's reading.

Each parent of the pupils in the experimental groups completed diaries, recording how long they assisted their child with each homework task. All the pupils were assessed to determine their ability to draw inferences from a reading selection before the study started and again at the end of the study.

The researchers found that the children who were given interactive homework and whose parents were trained how to support their children with their homework performed the best in a test of reading inference. The children who were given interactive homework, but whose parents were not trained how to support their children, performed better than the control group.

The parents of the children who were given interactive homework assignments doubled the amount of time they spent on helping their children with their homework. Before the study, parents reported spending an average of twenty-one minutes per night helping their children with homework, whilst during the study, parents reported spending an average of forty-four minutes per night. No significant difference was found between the parents who had attended, or not attended the training session in the length of time they spent on helping their children with their homework.

Reference:

Battle-Bailey, L., et al (2004) 'The effects of interactive reading homework and parent involvement on children's inference responses.' *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32 (3) pp. 173-178

Your Feedback

Have you found this study to be useful? Have you used any aspect of this research in your own classroom teaching practice? We would like to hear your feedback on this study. Click on the link below to share your views with us.
research@gtce.org.uk

Further reading

1. What else might I enjoy reading?

Every Child Matters

Publications are available at:

<http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/publications/>

The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment

Desforges, C. and Abouchar, A. ,(2003)

The full research report is available at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR433.pdf>

2. Related research

Improving children's behaviour and attendance through the use of parenting programmes: an examination of good practice

Hallam, S et al.,(2004)

Available at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR585.pdf>

The Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) project

A family education programme designed to enhance the conversations parents have with their children at home. Available at:

<http://www.peep.org.uk/>

What Works in Parenting Support? A Review of the International Evidence

Moran, P., et al,(2004)

DfES Research Report RR574

Available at:

<http://www.prb.org.uk/wwiparenting/RR574.pdf>

3. Summaries of Research

The Research Informed Practice Site (TRIPS) : Talking

The DfES Standards website also has a number of summaries of research on the theme of talking at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/speakandlisten/>

The Research Informed Practice Site (TRIPS): Parents

The DfES Standards website has a number of summaries of research on the theme of parents at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/parents/>

The NERF Bulletin 'Evidence for teaching and learning' includes readable summaries of research into topics of interest to teachers.

Articles related to dialogic learning include: child-adult interaction (Issue 1); using small-group discussions in science teaching (Issue 2); and learning in small groups (Issue 3). All can be downloaded from:

<http://www.nerf-uk.org/bulletin/?version=1>

4. Practical strategies for promoting parental involvement at home

A guide for teachers setting homework, including suggestions for how to involve parents, is available at:

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/HelpingStudents/index.html>

Suggestions for interactive homework assignments to encourage parents to discuss homework with their children are available at:

http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr053.shtml

DfES (2004). Engaging fathers: Involving parents, raising achievement. London: DfES. This booklet summarises research and information available on the subject of engaging fathers in their children's learning. Available at:

http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/6726/ACF21C0.pdf

'Story Sacks' projects are an excellent way of encouraging parents and carers to talk about books with their children.

Information about story sacks is available at:

http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement/pics/pics_storysacks/

5. Case studies

The Neighbourhood Renewal website has a number of case studies of partnerships between schools and other groups or organisations at:

<http://www.renewal.net/Nav.asp?Category=:education:early%20years:parental%20involvement>

Examples of ways different schools have approached involving parents are available on the DfES Standards site at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement/pics/>

Interesting case studies about setting homework are available on the DfES site at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/homework/casestudies/>

Appraisal

Parental involvement in their children's learning

The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review

Robustness

This study is a review of a wide range of literature relating to the involvement of parents in their children's education. It covers the age range from the early years of primary education to the end of key stage 4. Whilst the review does not conform to a full systematic review, the study is nonetheless well conceived and the methods are sufficiently rigorous to make the results trustworthy. The authors are fully transparent about their methods, which comprised searching data bases and websites using a short, relevant series of search terms and contact with internationally

known researchers in the field. The reliability of the study is further enhanced by the authors' careful explanation of the limitations of the study, and by the authors' indication of the quality and strength of the individual studies they focus on in the text. The authors also recognise that evaluation of parental involvement in terms of impact on pupils' learning is generally weak.

The study identifies and analyses two main types of literature: studies which aim to describe and understand the characteristics and impact of spontaneously occurring parental involvement, and those which seek to describe and evaluate interventions aimed at enhancing parents' spontaneous involvement in their children's education. The study explores why and how parents become involved in supporting their children, the impact such support has and the particular characteristics of parental support that have the greatest effects. The main findings of the study support the finding of the recent Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) research that it is what parents do at home to support their children, not who they are or what their status is, that makes the difference.

Relevance

The study is particularly relevant in the context of the current debate about the importance of the home environment for early learning and about increasing the involvement of parents from low status socio-economic backgrounds in their children's education. School leaders, local government officers and others in the community with an interest in overcoming the effects of social disadvantage on children's education will find the material helpful.

Applicability

Through a series of vignettes of individual studies the authors give useful pointers regarding what works both in terms of enhancing parents' involvement per se and in the specific ways parents can help their children's pedagogic development, such as engaging in parent-child discourse and other forms of what they call 'good at-home parenting'. The information in the review should provide teachers and school leaders with a detailed picture of schools' relations with parents, what helps and what hinders, and may prompt them, also, to reflect on their own role in this key process and how they could become more effective.

Writing

The report is written in an accessible style, which is likely to engage a wide audience of education practitioners including teachers. There is no jargon. Chapter headings helpfully point the reader to the different components of the study. Findings are clearly identified and presented early in the report and the methods are kept to the end. The key points are illustrated by vignettes.