PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

Think Family

In the European Union, the traditional family (e.g. a mother and father in a married relationship with two children) is the reality for only one child in seven. The challenge for schools is therefore 'Family Engagement'; who are they engaged with?

Demographics and social change mean that many families, even when blood-related, do not necessarily live close to each other, as was the case just a few decades ago. Grandparenting, for example, can be conducted across continents on a very regular basis by email, mobile phone, text messaging, web-cam or Facebook. Many schools will experience regular and proactive contact with Grandparents, yet recent research (Findler, 2007) has shown that whilst they are a significant family resource, they are currently practically ignored. Grandparents should be part of the educational, social and cultural activities of Academy life, bringing their own personal views, experience and their own history. In the current climate, Grandparents are increasingly shouldering large amounts of responsibility, and offering direct assistance to families through child-minding, practical and financial support.

Schools can do much to promote family cohesion, at a time when many of the traditional community hubs for family life have vanished, or are under threat. There is a role, especially when a student has Special Educational Needs, for considering the contributions for siblings, particularly where it is known that they are closely involved in the life of their brother or sister. They may be the ones that offer homework support or organise appropriate social activities. In black and minority ethnic communities, where English is an additional language, older siblings often act as interpreters. Are siblings ever invited to make a written contribution to an Annual Review meeting, or even attend as an advocate for their brother/sister with SEN?

CASE STUDY - The RSA Academy, Tipton, West Midlands

Schools are not always comfortable places for men: they can be perceived as feminised places. At the RSA Academy specific thought was given to male engagement strategies to try to increase the involvement of Fathers in the education of their children. Once a term, on a Saturday morning, a 'Lads and Dads' event is offered: (this is open to Fathers and their sons/daughters). A specific focus around computers, science etc is offered, with a very practical orientation. Numbers attending may be small, but the quality of interaction is high and the fathers feel valued and involved. Breaking down the perceived barriers, tangible or invisible, is crucial to encouraging men, as fathers, to engage meaningfully in their children's education.

Many schools have established excellent working relationships with parents, gently nurtured over many years. These form the basis of the new partnership of engagement that schools now need to forge with families. Partnership with Families is a far more inclusive term. It promotes a whole family pathway, valuing the contribution of key family members. Some of these members may not be blood relatives: neighbours and family friends often offer childcare and are key in supporting mobile 21st century families.

The Coalition Government, in their statements on children with Special Educational Needs, say that 'supporting vulnerable children is a priority for the Government'. Certainly vulnerability is a thread which unifies the rapidly emerging group of children and young people with Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities entering our school system, whether the source of that is disability, deprivation or disadvantage (Carpenter, 2010). This goal also has to be set within the context of new figures showing a massive increase in the numbers of children with disabilities in the UK, which have risen from 700,000 to 950,000 since 2004, (a 36% increase), (Blackburn et al, 2010).

Eight Building Blocks for creating Partnerships with Families

Indicator	Key question
Policy	1. Does your School Policy speak of 'Partnership with Parents'? Is this an accurate reflection of practice? 2. Are there family representatives, other than parents, on your Governing or Advisory groups?
Support	1. If you have a designated space, is it labelled 'Parents Room'? Could it be renamed 'Family Room'? 2. What mechanisms have you made explicit for families to make contact for advice, guidance etc?
Resources	1. Do you have a Link Family Scheme, where, (with consent) families of new children with SEN are put in touch with existing families (perhaps on the basis of similar need, e.g. asthma, diabetes, dyslexia, etc). 2. Are there resources, electronic or otherwise, that families can access which deepens their insights and understanding into their child's needs?
Education	1. Do you offer workshops for families of students on your SEN Register to brief them on specific strategies they could use at home? 2. Do you offer anything specifically for 'other' family members, e.g. events for Dads, or 'Sibshops' (workshops for siblings who may carry particular issues about a sibling with special needs)?
Collaboration	1. Do you have packs of resource materials available for families to use at home? 2. Is there a shared electronic forum where families can review resources, comment on initiatives or access high quality information (e.g. facts on autism, dyslexia, etc)?
Liaison	1. Are your Review or IEP planning meetings open to any family members with a contribution to make? 2. How inclusive is your correspondence with the home? Does it always begin 'Dear Parents', or could it be 'Dear Family Members'? Are your facilities clearly 'All Welcome'?
Communications	1. Are your communication pathways flexible, and inclusive of all family members? Do you know who you are communicating with? Do your records only record the names of mother and father? Or do they record siblings, grandparents and others on a 'Who supports the child?' basis. 2. How are the child's achievements profiled in such a way that they can be shared in the supporting family group? (Maybe through a DVD of video clips, or a photographic 'Achievement Diary'?)
Information	1. The family is always the richest source of information about the child. In seeking to address the child's special needs have you met with his/her key family supporters? 2. How do you sustain a two way flow of information which empowers the family in their task of supporting and caring for a child with special needs? Are you enabling a proactive partnership which builds a team-around-the-child?

All of these building blocks have to be set in a context of key principles:

1. Be honest with each other
2. Be willing to learn from each other
3. Treat each other with respect and dignity
4. Be willing to admit you made mistakes
5. Work collaboratively and co-operatively
6. Be yourself

Conclusion

Schools have the freedom to create a new approach to working with children and young people with SEN, one that is based on Partnership with families. Children need Families, just as they need Education. By empowering each other we can empower our children, making them resilient individuals able to meet the challenges and opportunities of life in the 21st century.

References

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