



Partnership with families

Special educational needs

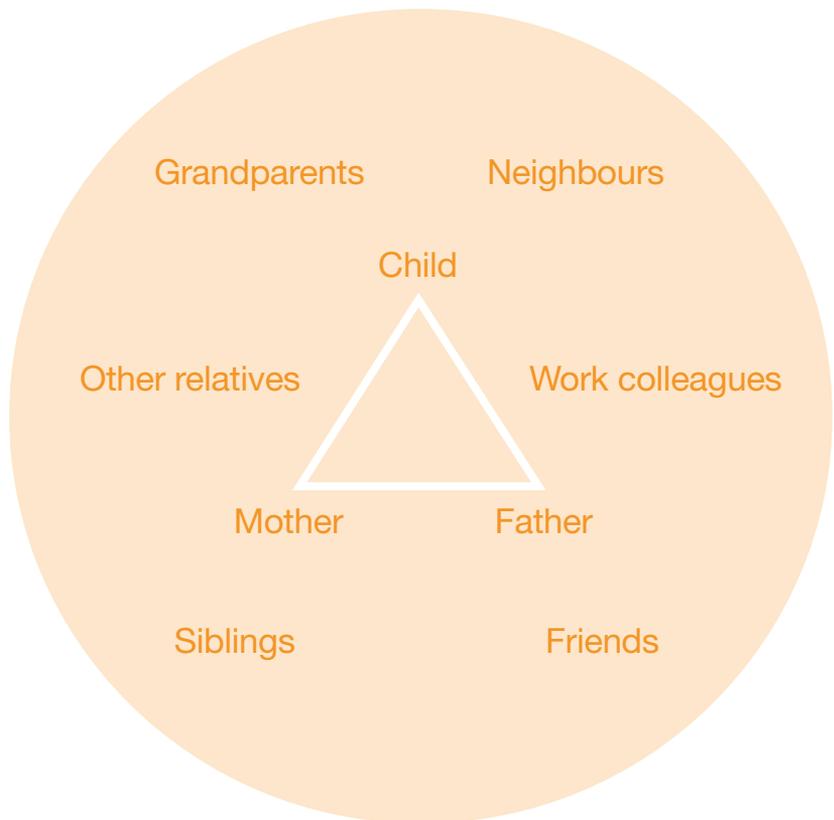
Current issues

In the 21st century, the challenge for academies is ‘partnership with families’ rather than ‘partnership with parents’. Partnership with families is a far more inclusive term that promotes whole family engagement and values the contribution of key members. Families, rather than parents alone, are the day-to-day reality for many children, and extended family members frequently undertake a significant care-giving role. Some of these members may not be blood relatives, but neighbours and family friends who offer childcare and key support.

‘Families are big, small, extended, nuclear, multi-generational, with one parent, two parents, and grandparents. They live under one roof or many. A family can be as temporary as a few weeks, as permanent as forever. We become part of a family by birth, adoption, marriage or from a desire for mutual support. A family is a culture unto itself, with different values and unique ways of realising its dreams. Together, our families become the source of our rich cultural heritage and spiritual diversity. Our families create neighbourhoods, communities, states and nations.’

(Carpenter, 2002)

The model below advocates an extended family support network that values the self-defined family.



Organisational response

Many schools and academies have established excellent working relationships with parents, gently nurtured over many years. They can also 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.

In the current financial climate, grandparents are increasingly shouldering large amounts of responsibility, and offering direct assistance to families through child-minding, financial and other practical support. Many academies will experience regular and proactive contact with grandparents, yet recent research (Findler, 2007) has shown that their place in the lives of children with learning difficulties is rarely acknowledged. Grandparents should be part of the educational, social and cultural activities of academy life, bringing their own personal views, experience and their own history.

When a student has learning difficulties, siblings are often closely involved perhaps offering homework support or organising appropriate social activities. In minority communities, older siblings often act as interpreters. Are they ever invited to make a written contribution to an annual review meeting or even attend as an advocate for their brother/sister?

Case study

Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Academy, Tipton, West Midlands

Academies are not always comfortable for men: they can be perceived as feminised places. At the RSA Academy, specific thought was given to 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 that is open to fathers and their sons or 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, is crucial to encouraging men, as fathers, to engage meaningfully in their children's education.

Table 1
Eight building blocks for creating partnerships with families

Practical implications

| Indicator | Key question |
|-----------------------|---|
| Policy | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Does your academy 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 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Do you have a link family scheme, where (with consent) families of new children with learning difficulties are put in touch with existing families (perhaps on the basis of similar need)? 2 Are there resources, electronic or otherwise, that families can access which deepens their insight into and understanding of their child's needs? |
| Education | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Do you offer workshops for families of students on your special educational needs register to brief them on specific strategies they could use at home? 2 Do you offer anything specifically for other family members (eg events for dads, or 'Sibshops' – workshops for siblings who may carry particular issues about a sibling with special needs)? |
| Collaboration | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 (eg facts on autism, dyslexia, etc)? |
| Liaison | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Are your review or individual education plan 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 welcoming for all? |
| Communications | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 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 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 The family is always the richest source of information about the child. In seeking to address the child's learning difficulties have you met with their 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.

Future considerations

Academies have the freedom to create a new approach to working with children and young people with learning difficulties, 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.