



COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH PARENTS

A guide to engaging your greatest advocates

An educational and economic imperative

Parental involvement is both an educational and economic imperative. Parents are a powerful force for good, at home and in the wider school community: as cheerleaders for their children's education, as homework-chasers, as sports kit-washers, as mentors and motivators, as fundraisers, as volunteers at school clubs and on trips, as guest speakers, and as contacts on work experience placements. The list goes on.

Sadly, this precious resource is often not fully utilised. The unfortunate reality is that many schools struggle to engage too many of their parents. Fragmented messaging on a myriad of platforms gets lost and in spite of the best intentions, busy parents do not always know how to navigate school management information systems (MIS). They become frustrated and overwhelmed, with poor communications as a pet peeve for many of them.

"Parental engagement has a large and positive impact on children's learning. This was the single most important finding," concluded the government-commissioned *"review of best practice in parental engagement"* in 2010.

This echoed John Hattie's findings three years before: *"The effect of parental engagement over a student's school career is equivalent to adding two or three years to that student's education."*

Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement, 2008

In this ebook, we outline five principles to strengthen the home-school partnership:

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1. Take a yearly view

Communication should be seen as an act in itself: not a bolt-on or by-product. It is, therefore, something to plan and schedule.

You can start by critically reviewing your overarching communications policy: its aims and current approaches. The planning cycle will include a timetable of key calendar events and announcements: parents' evening, examinations, sport fixtures, music, and drama. An approval system is useful for auditing key communications before they're sent out.

2. Plan around weekly and termly communications

Newsletters, published at the same time every week, go a long way to keep parents up to date with what's going on at school, as do communications to mark the start and end of each term. Parents welcome these reminders. They don't always have the time, or the inclination to access online school calendars or trawl through letters and forms.

Modern tech does the sorting for parents, filtering emails for sets, year groups, genders, and activities, so that parents receive only what is relevant to their child. The alternative is bombarding them with a barrage of irrelevant

Communicate consistently

Too often, school communications are reactive rather than proactive, a matter of fire-fighting rather than a steady stream of ongoing communications to ensure that parents are reassured and kept up to date. Schools need to make it clear to parents when and where to find the information for their child.



3. Enlist parental support from the outset

There's a honeymoon period when both parent and child are excited by all the rich possibilities of a new learning environment. This is a teaching moment: the ideal time to promote good communication habits and a collaborative approach. Investing time in induction will save hours in the long term. Positive interactions with parents from the get-go ease the way for more challenging conversations later on.

4. Outline clear expectations for a learning partnership

Parents want to get involved and join the learning conversation, but they don't always know how.

Outline clear expectations. Parents can help their children by establishing clear boundaries and routines, as well as goal-setting and time-management. They can also monitor reading, revision, and homework activities. As a school you can help parents with easy access to timetables, shared resources, and exam specifications. Clear communication circumvents a hundred questions and misunderstandings about what's on a particular course or exam.



The research says...

"Well-designed school communications can be effective for improving attainment and a range of other outcomes, such as attendance. Examples include weekly texts sent from school to parents, and short, termly letters. Impacts from such approaches may appear small but they are generally low cost, and straightforward to introduce."

[Working with parents to support children's learning: Guidance report](#)
The Education Endowment Foundation, page 7





Lead with purpose

Purposeful means taking the time to plan and deliver strong communications which shine a light on all the good work a school does. Offer parents more than just a window onto the school world; lead them through a door into the heart of the school community.

1. Make communications readable

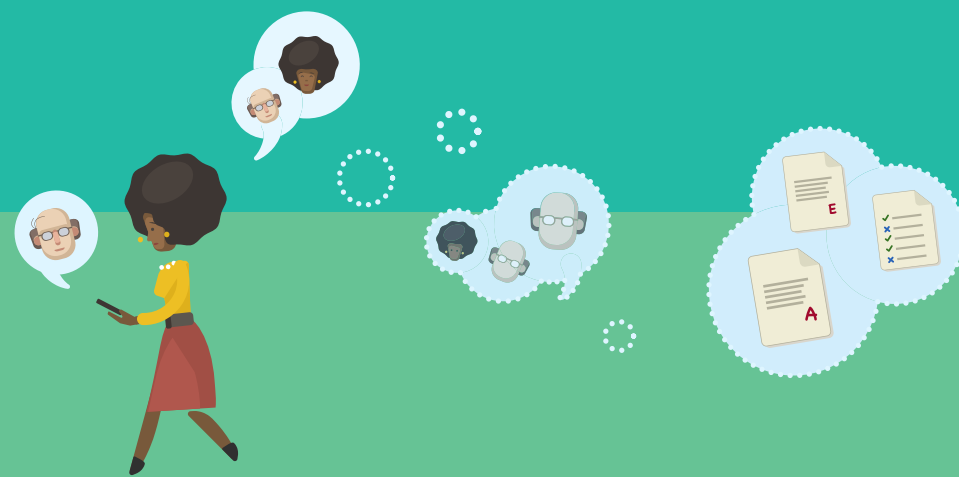
Let clarity and brevity be your watchwords. Parents are busy. Say too much, and you'll overwhelm and lose many of them. Structure emails so that the most important information is prominent. Highlight key details so that they can be understood at a glance, especially if action is required.

The capacity to send targeted SMS messages to inform parents about last-minute cancellations or a minibus that's stuck in traffic en route home saves teachers and parents a lot of time and frustration.

2. Agree on a house style

Simple guidelines can enhance readability no end. Bullet points, bold text, capitalisation, and other presentational features are easy to implement and hugely helpful to parents. Photos bring messaging to life and make it all the more memorable.

Encourage departments to save time setting up and sending out communications by using templates with the same design, logos, and brand guidelines.



3. Inform, inspire and INVOLVE parents

Great communication is the best way to build community and trust. Every message cements the school-home partnership.

Pupils do so many wonderful things in classrooms and corridors, and stages and sports arenas over the course of each week. Communications should sing their praises, if not from the rooftops, then from newsletters, school websites, and social media. This creates the sense of an ongoing, unfolding narrative, and parents begin to feel directly involved as if they, too, were on the journey.

4. Celebrate every success

Flagship events such as open days, sports fixtures, concerts, plays, and parents' evenings all enrich this narrative. Modern tech platforms allow schools to publish online portfolios for each child, so parents can enjoy their best work. During lockdown, along with lesson plans, study guides, past papers, and model answers, many schools put lesson footage, teacher interviews, and virtual tours online. It makes sense to use the parent portal as a marketing tool to show off all the school has to offer and help build advocacy.



The research says...

Evidence demonstrates the cyclical nature of parental engagement. Early parental involvement has been shown to influence achievement, which in turn influences student motivation. Highly motivated students then encourage parents to continue involvement. Findings suggest early parental involvement sets the stage for subsequent parental involvement, students' motivation and academic achievement.

[The Longitudinal Process of Early Parent Involvement on Student Achievement: A Path Analysis](#)

M Hayakawa et al., NHSA dialog 16, no. 1 (2013)



Make it easy & teacher-friendly

Teachers are no less busy than parents. Teaching, marking, planning lessons, running teams and clubs are quite enough to juggle over the course of the day, without having to chase forms or payments from parents. Communication has to be easy and intuitive, almost effortless.

1. Streamline systems and processes

Modern tech can reduce the burden of day-to-day admin tasks, from sophisticated messaging tools for teachers to payments for activities or the scheduling of parents' evenings.

School trips are also so much easier to organise when everything is on one system: no more printing, distributing, and chasing replies. Messaging tools also allow staff to monitor unread or unanswered emails, send reminders, and download replies straight into a spreadsheet.

2. Make sure all staff are fully trained

CPD is predominantly based on teaching and learning, and rightly so. But when parental engagement is so significant, it makes sense to teach staff how best to harness parent power. Full working knowledge of school communications systems is integral to this.

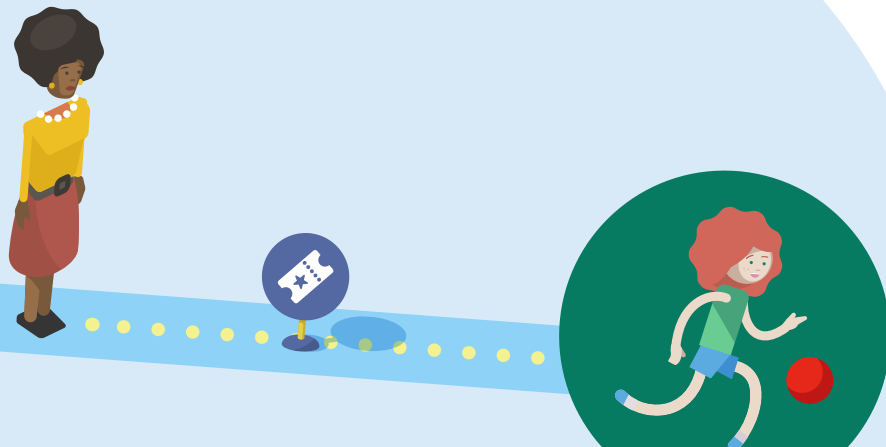


3. Implement a buddy system within departments

One quick demo in an INSET session on a rainy day in September isn't enough to get everyone on board with all that new tech has to offer. Training mentors is the most effective way to spread best practice.

4. Set up an area for staff to share ideas and solutions

Staff can post queries, or share what's worked for them in a forum, or post sample newsletters or trip forms and proformas for others to use. (There's no point reinventing the wheel for every school trip.) Mentors can address frequently asked questions and share monthly "Top tips".



The research says...

"Most schools say that they do not have an explicit plan for how they work with parents, and fewer than 10% of teachers have undertaken CPD on parental engagement."

[Working with parents to support children's learning: Guidance report](#)
The Education Endowment Foundation, page 6



3. Adopt a supportive, non-judgemental attitude

All parents want their child to thrive, but not every parent has fond memories of school life. Seeming indifference may be better explained by feelings of inadequacy. With that in mind, communicate carefully to avoid discouraging parents.

When problems arise, talk in terms of areas of development, and use the language of suggestion and possibility. Try “Why not...?” rather than “you should”. The former empowers the parent; the latter assumes “teacher knows best” and risks alienating some. School communication is not a one-way, top-down broadcast: it is a two-way, mutual partnership.

4. Take diversity into account

Consider the background, working lives, language, and culture of parents.

For instance, modern parent portals make it all the easier to schedule flexible timings for parents’ evenings. They also facilitate online video meetings as an alternative, which are often better for both teachers and parents, especially with Covid-related restrictions.

Language is also a barrier for some parents. Think about using parent communication platforms which can translate messaging and information with ease.



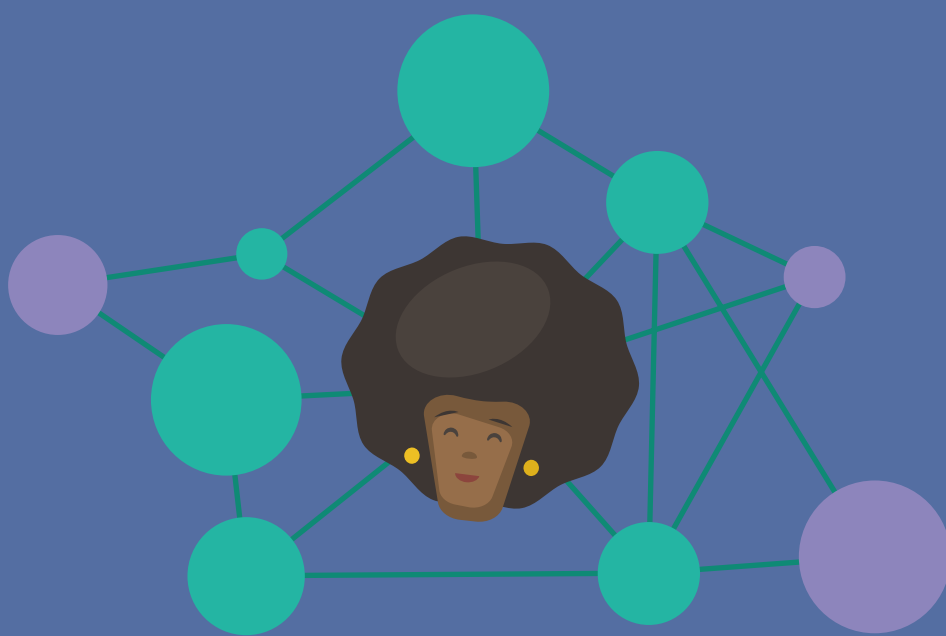
The research says...

“Parental engagement requires active collaboration with parents and should be proactive rather than reactive. It should be sensitive to the circumstances of all families, recognise the contributions parents can make, and aim to empower parents.”

[Review of best practice in parent engagement](#)

J. Goodall and J. Vorhaus (London, UK: Department for Education, 2011), page 10





Focus on peace of mind

It's the case that for some parents to access school information, they need to log in to various different tools: their email, homework apps, a parents' evening scheduler, a separate system for clubs and payments. A unified system, which is also safe and secure, will go some way to establish trust and ensure high parental engagement rates.

1. Unify information and infrastructure to form one single ecosystem

Now more than ever, parents want, or rather demand, a seamless experience at the touch of a button. To reduce frustration, integrate all your platforms - with communications history, blogs, newsletters, payments - into one ecosystem across your school. If this ecosystem arrives through an intuitive mobile app, even better.

2. Provide parents with secure access to confidential information

In an age of GDPR and cyber security fears, parents want and expect easy access to sensitive messaging relating to behaviour, attendance, and academic progress. Be sure to use platforms you can trust to publish reports, assessments, and exam results online.



3. Simplify data gathering and input for teachers

Ideally, teachers shouldn't have to input information more than once. Each entry should automatically update records across the board, like entries on an Excel spreadsheet. Data is then easy to later access in one place.

Modern tech allows teachers to set and mark work, while it automatically publishes grades and feedback, to both pastoral teams and parents. This can sit alongside attendance and behavioural data.

4. Ensure parents have access to dynamic, continuous reporting

Early intervention when work is late or pupils need extra assistance is essential.

Modern tech enables a 360 view, helping teachers and parents to join the dots, spot patterns, and nip problems in the bud. The longer they go unnoticed, the likelier bad habits become ingrained. An ongoing, real-time commentary on pupil progress prevents nasty surprises at parent's evening. Instead, teachers can suggest an action plan and hit the ground running when both parties meet.



The research says...

"ICT can contribute to improved parental engagement by providing a convenient means for parents to access up-to-date information about their child's learning. ICT enables parents to be more engaged with their child's learning, and supports more flexible working arrangements for staff."

[Review of best practice in parent engagement](#)

J. Goodall and J. Vorhaus (London, UK: Department for Education, 2011), page 6





Simplify engagement across your whole school!

Firefly is the trusted platform for Parent Engagement and Learning Continuity. Alongside our LMS solution, our Parent Portal is the ultimate platform to help your school reduce teacher workload, streamline administrative tasks and give your parents a richer understanding of their child's learning.

With our new Parent Portal you can:

Integrate seamlessly with Microsoft Teams & Google Classroom

Give parents full visibility of homework, however it is set, allowing them to better support their child's learning beyond the classroom.



Manage events & parents' evenings

Simplify management of ongoing communications, trips and events, along with payments to ensure parents have all the information they need.



Streamline communications

Ensure efficient admin processes for the delivery of academic information such as school reports, attendance and behaviour records, exam results and parents' evenings.

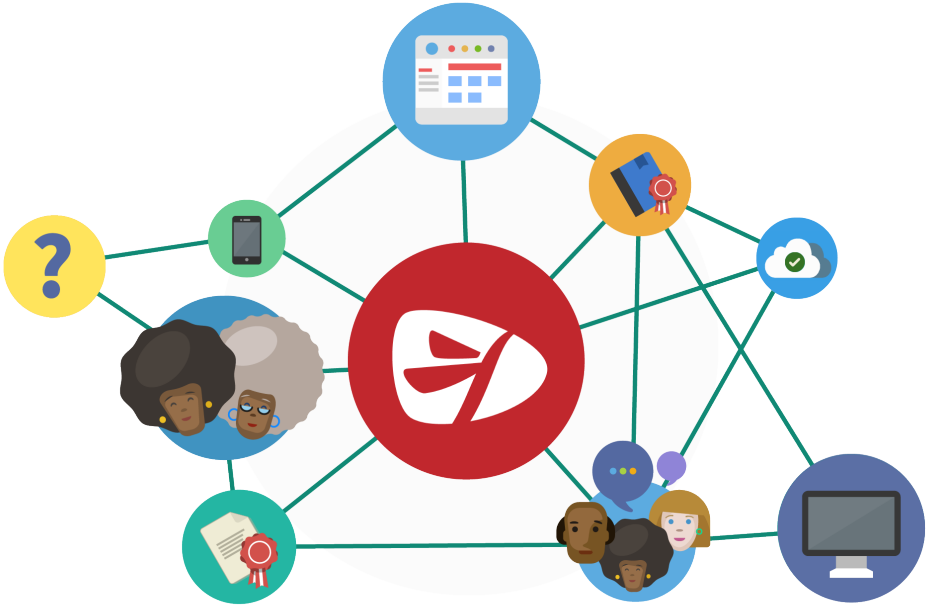


Engage your whole parent community

Engage across your wider community, sharing timetables and calendars, resources, and updates all managed through a single central hub.



If you would like to find out more visit: fireflylearning.com/Parent-Portal



The Parent Engagement & Learning Continuity platform

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