

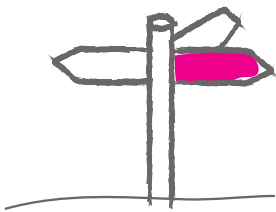


July 2016

'In practice' Working with Primary Schools

A guide to assist practitioners who wish to develop working
partnerships with schools to support vulnerable families

Preface



This In Practice paper will assist practitioners who wish to develop working partnerships with schools to support vulnerable families.

This paper forms part of the Big Lottery funded [Improving Futures programme](#) to share the learning from 26 projects across the UK. The £26 million programme provided up to £900,000 to 26 pilot projects across the UK, to test different approaches to improve outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs. The evaluation and learning arm of this project is carried out by [Ecorys UK](#), [IPSOS Mori](#), Professor Kate Morris and [Parenting UK](#) (part of Family Lives).

Key recommendations:

1. Face to face engagement is paramount when attempting to establish your project in a school. Do not just rely on promotional leaflets and enquiry emails to get your project noticed. develop strategies to overcome them.

2. Be flexible. You may have a set idea about the support your team can offer, but some projects found it beneficial to ask the schools what they required, and then tailored their support services around that brief.

3. Where possible, focus on the whole family approach. Some of the projects found the schools they worked with to be particularly amenable to whole family approaches.

4. Be patient. Your project is likely one of many services and commitments the school is considering outside of core teaching and learning. You may have to frequently chase up enquiries or reschedule meetings before you make progress.

5. Attempt to form a relationship with a member of teaching staff or Senior Management Team (SMT) who has influence within the school, someone who will champion your project or service amidst complex priorities and time pressures.

6. Ensure that the details of your project and evaluation are agreed in writing with the school so that each party knows what is expected from the other.



7. Conversely, try and keep paperwork to a minimum so as not to overburden already overloaded staff with forms and notes.

8. Packaging your service with a business case may make your work more attractive to an SMT focussed on tangible outcomes. For example, abstract and hard to define qualifiers such as 'emotional wellbeing' and 'improved engagement' might not help your proposal in the early stages. Positioning your proposal in terms of attainment, attendance and a school's reputation may benefit you.

9. Once you have established your project, maintain the relationship through open communication and timely responses.

Introduction

This paper will focus on two things: how to establish your project within a school setting, and how to foster good engagement and communication between a school and parents or carers, particularly vulnerable families.

To inform this learning paper we:

- interviewed project managers from all 26 Improving Futures projects specifically about lessons learnt relating to working with schools;
- reviewed evidence from our case study visits with all 26 Improving Futures projects, which included interviews with practitioners and managers from the Improving Futures projects and local partners and interviews with families;
- reviewed available literature about effective support for improving emotional and social wellbeing;
- discussed emotional and wellbeing with two Family Advisory Panels. These panels consist of family members (sometimes supported by project workers) who use services in various projects across the UK. The aim of these panels is to give a voice to family members using Improving Futures services to comment on the evaluation and its findings. In July 2015 two family advisory panels were held, one in the north and one in the south of England, and were attended in total by fifteen families. Three project workers were also in attendance to offer assistance and translation where needed.

As reported in the [Improving Futures Year 2 Evaluation report](#), four of the projects are permanently co-located in schools:

Camden Futures has a team of Parent Support Advisors based in schools, which support parents who have particular issues with the school or their child's education. They also have two Creative Therapists, who are music and arts therapists based in schools.

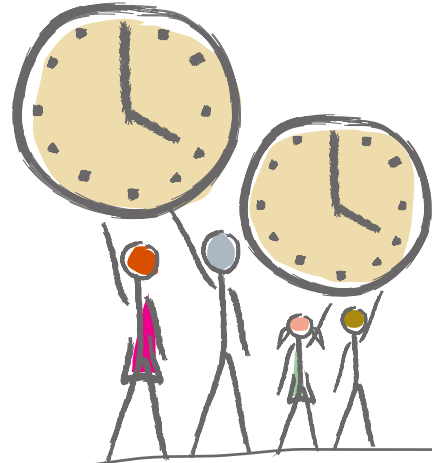
Eleri, Cardiff has practitioners based in four schools, who support both the children in the school and their parents. This includes running weekly circle time sessions for groups of children in the school, aimed at improving their emotional literacy, and running the Roots of Empathy programme.

Gateway, Fife: has Family Mentors based in primary schools.

Families First, Hackney

Whilst other projects are not permanently based in a school, they do deliver school-based interventions. Croydon Family Power and Family Pathways, Lewisham both run the Roots to Empathy programme in schools. The Denbighshire 'Bridge Project' holds weekly drop-in sessions at six schools, The Neighbourhood Alliance, Sunderland, runs therapy sessions in schools. Some projects have also built strong links with schools and have assigned their practitioners to specific schools: Enfield Family Turnaround Project and Stronger Families, Future Communities have allocated their practitioners specific schools to work with.

We will now explore the various ways that Improving Futures projects established their services and how they strengthened engagement between schools and families.



Establishing your project in a school

CONTACT

As noted in the key recommendations, face to face contact is paramount to establishing your project within a school. Not only will you have the undivided attention of the school staff member you're meeting with, but you can also have a conversation about the school's needs and where you can fit within that, rather than a prescriptive, impersonal, promotional leaflet.

If the school has a family liaison officer, you may find it beneficial to contact them in the first instance rather than a head teacher or head of school. One project found success in targeting schools with lower Ofsted scores.

Involve yourself in the community and, where possible, attend school boards and local groups. Many projects found being 'known' in the community to be highly beneficial when seeking to work with schools and families. The Dundee Early Intervention Team also made themselves available for child forum meetings, local meetings attended by parents, teachers and community leaders to discuss school issues, to raise awareness of their project; the Haringey 'Building Bridges project' reported that they are going to the 'Early Help Forums' that are attended by school staff, head teachers and the Head of Education for the LA. They have found that schools are mostly open to the service, but it can depend on which professional they liaise with (e.g. head teachers tend to be more difficult to convince). The project reported that the 'Early Help Forums' are a particularly good way of getting the engagement of schools because they happen across the borough, so the project gets a wide reach.



Examine your team and identify whether the mix of training and experience is there to deliver what's required. The Inverclyde project went through a similar process and in order to build on their skills roster they employed a former teacher as a senior project worker. The project felt this addition to the team gave them credibility in schools as they understood the curriculum and the pressures the schools faced. The project also felt that this worker shared a common language with school staff and felt more able to work with schools to meet their needs.

Once you have established your project, maintain the relationship through open communication and timely responses. According to the Fife Gingerbread project, lots of the engagement with schools is down to relationships. Consequently all of the family mentors are allocated a school to be 'responsible' for and build an ongoing relationship with them, so the school has a consistent point of contact with the project. Families will then be allocated to a worker according to the school the child attends, again meaning that there's consistency for the school too.

AUDIENCE

Who are you trying to reach? What are their concerns? These are important questions to consider when establishing your project. The Midlothian Project noted that they adapted their pitch to their audience through researching the demographics of each school's population and circumstances. Members of their project familiarised themselves with the school's attainment levels, diversity and socio-economic background.

Try to consider what the priorities of the schools are. The Enfield Project stated that they were mindful of school priorities such as Ofsted inspections and the school's self-evaluation. They found that by supporting these priorities they made the project useful not only to the beneficiaries but the school.

The Hackney 'Families First' project supports schools which have a high level of children that are from Turkish and Kurdish communities. These communities have benefited from the project because, as the project reports, often these families do not have recourse to public funding (including Pupil Premium as it is dependent on a person's immigration or visa status¹). If you are able to assess a gap in service provision, you may find tailoring your service to meet specific needs to be beneficial.

ASSESSMENT

The Inverclyde project worked in partnership with the school to assess people's needs. The project reported that it used the '[Boxall Profile](#)' assessment tool, a tool which is used in schools to assess social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Utilising this tool enabled the project staff and school staff to work collaboratively in assessing a child's needs. The project reported two positives to this approach. Firstly, the project felt it encouraged school staff to better reflect on the child's needs, and secondly, the approach demonstrated to the schools that the project was having the desired effect based on the shared aims.

The Families Moving Forwards: Learning Links Portsmouth project noted two other assessment tools that they were considering using, namely: [Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale](#) and the [Common Assessment Framework](#).

¹ Find out more information [here](#)

EVIDENCE

It is important that you gather data and evidence, not only to explore whether your work is having a positive impact, but also so that you can prove your impact to future partners and funders. The Enfield project holds half-termly meetings with schools to discuss progress and get feedback on how the children are progressing in school. The project reported that this all adds to the evidence base for the project, but also reassures schools.

The Denbighshire 'Bridge Project' also extolled the value of the evidence. They reported that, in general, schools have not really requested any specific evidence to display the success of the project, but the project has used report information to show schools the impact and improvements made throughout the project. The project also has examples of schools where they've gone into and helped families and then the school's overall Ofsted 'Standard of Wellbeing²' has increased. They found this a valuable piece of information to use to try and get the attention of new (or slightly reluctant) schools.

The Bridgend 'Action for Children' project gathered information that not only allowed them to refine their service, but also allowed them to promote themselves to other schools in the area. The project conducted mid-point reviews with the schools they work with, during which they would meet with school professionals and discuss what was working well and what wasn't working well. The project would use the data from these reviews to promote the project to other schools in the local area.

SUSTAINABILITY

To sustain your project past its initial funding block you may wish to approach the school and ask whether they would consider match funding or utilising Pupil Premium. You may also wish to contact charities in your area to see whether they could assist in sustaining your service. The Tyne Gateway project has been successful in securing Service Level Agreements with a number of the schools it works with, committing to using some pupil premium in the additional funding period. This is a strategy worth considering when implementing your project or service.

It is important to maintain the working relationships with schools that you have supported. If your service has performed well you could ask them to advocate on your behalf to other schools so that you can widen your impact.

Consistency is key; even if your project has been successful you will continue to vie for attention with other competing services and projects. The Haringey 'Building Bridges' project instigated ongoing talks and discussions with school leads and delivered presentations throughout the year. Also consider whether you could enter into a joint-bid with schools when applying for funding.



² Be advised that the Ofsted 'Standard of Wellbeing' criteria only applies to schools and colleges based in England.



BRIDGING THE GAP

The Haringey 'Building Bridges' project raised a couple of valid points that you as a service provider may wish to consider when designing your service:

1. Will you be providing your service across school transitions?

The project reported that schools wish to know what happens to the families where the child is transitioning to secondary school. The project felt that that age group is often neglected in terms of support and schools seek assurances that families will get the support they need when their child reaches this age group.

Another project also reported that they had difficulty maintaining contact with families over the six week school summer holidays.

2. Can you protect provision if a family moves outside of your service catchment area?

The project reported an issue they had encountered. They reported that schools are concerned about the number of children who have been moved into temporary housing outside of the Borough of Haringey but whom still attend school in Haringey. The project feels that this comprised something of a "blurred boundary" because technically the project does not have a remit to reach people outside of the borough. However, they also felt it to be inappropriate to withdraw all support halfway through a family's service provision.

Fostering good relations between schools and families

It is widely accepted that parental engagement has a strong impact on educational attainment:

“ Parental involvement is strongly positively influenced by the child's level of attainment: the higher the level of attainment, the more parents get involved. ”
(Desforges and Abouchar, 2003, p.4)

However, it has been found that some schools don't always do enough to work proactively with parents in realistic settings:

“ Parents perceive schools as presenting obstacles in the form of lack of encouragement, not informing parents of what they can do, and having too little scope for fitting around busy working and family lives. ”
(Goodall, et al, 2010, p.10)

Many of the projects are focusing on building families' relationships with the schools their children attend. The Fife Gingerbread project is focusing on the parent transition to school as well as the child's, and supporting them through it in order to make school a more positive aspect of their lives – they report that lots of the parents have historically had poor experiences of school so are starting from a negative standpoint.

If a parent has had a negative experience with a school, perhaps over behaviour disputes, time-keeping etc. you may find yourself in a good position to mediate. Being independent of the school, yet established within its setting, allows you to build bridges and remain a trusted go-to between the two parties.

The Fife Gingerbread project also stated that it is hard for schools to support families in a very busy day, but a school needs to be part of the community. This is especially the case in deprived communities where people have had bad experiences of statutory services. The project has found that the amount of buy in to whole family support varies amongst schools – some are now running similar family services themselves in house while others don't do anything more than run a breakfast club. The project believes it is all down to the personality of the school leaders.

The Sunderland Neighbourhood Alliance project successfully established a 'Mums Allowed' literacy initiative with the aim of engaging mothers. This initiative yielded two benefits. One, mothers were welcomed into the school setting in a positive way. Two, the mothers were able to work on their own literacy skills which enabled them to build their own confidence. In regards to bridging the divide between a school and parent, a project representative at the learning seminar reflected on how they tackled this issue, stating: *"But they [the school] welcome the opportunity to engage parents, so we concentrated on the parent involvement officers...because schools want to look good, and engage parents that are hard to engage. And sometimes they've got officers but those officers still can't engage them, but a community-based organisation can. So having those two parent support agencies, one from within the school, and out of the school, that was our pathway in."*

ENGAGING PARENTS

At the July 2015 Improving Futures learning seminar, a project representative reported on their experience of examining how a school's rules and procedures did not seem to consider individual or family circumstances: "It's the lack of understanding of the presentation in the classroom, and in school. I think schools are still just looking at child within the classroom, rather than child within the family and child within the community and child within - you know, and so they just look at that behaviour and say, 'This behaviour's not acceptable in this classroom. You have to sit down. You have to behave.' Rather than saying, 'Well, why is this child behaving in this way? What's caused that?'"

The Tyne Gateway project noted that whilst they don't share any confidential information with the school they do, with parental permission, let their key workers liaise with teachers and school staff to give them a better understanding of that child's home life and any barriers to progress. The project often found that children were misbehaving in school due to issues at home, and this method allowed good dialogue between the project and school and allowed them to contextualise the issue.



You may find it beneficial to consider the ‘parental role’ when deciding on an appropriate strategy to engage parents. The Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau states:

“ Parental role construction is important not just because it affects parents’ decisions about how and whether to become engaged, but also because role construction is intimately linked to academic achievement. Parental aspirations and expectations for their children’s education have a strong relationship to academic outcomes. In turn, a parent’s sense of efficacy and belief in their ability to help their children is central to whether and how they become involved with their children’s schooling. The lowest likelihood of engagement occurs when parental role construction is weak – that is, when parents do not believe they should be involved in their child’s education and have at the same time a low sense of efficacy.

(Emerson, et al, 2012, p.11)

The Denbighshire ‘Bridge Project’ established numerous initiatives to get parents involved, such as: monthly drop-ins, coffee and cake mornings, and internet safety classes. The Project held these events at local schools which not only brought the parents into the school environment but also allowed the project to make itself known to the community.

Case study

Language may also be a barrier to engagement, and the ‘Families First’ project in Hackney focussed on this, explored in detail in the [Improving Futures Year 2 Evaluation Report](#):

“ As part of the ‘Families First’ project, a project worker is based in two local primary schools several hours a week. His title is ‘Parental Involvement Officer’ and he is employed by DayMer, the local Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre. The headteachers at the schools identify and refer Turkish and Kurdish parents to the Parental Involvement Officer for 1-2-1 support, as they have English as a second language (ESOL), and are unfamiliar with the English school system. He also runs workshops and coffee morning at the schools. The parents targeted have children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The Parental Involvement Officer provides translation and advice as the parents are not familiar with the English school system and curriculum (e.g. he translates letters the parents have received, and their children’s reports). He also attends parents’ evenings to help explain the teachers’ feedback on their children’s development to their parents. He helps parents understand issues to do with their children’s education – the focus of advice is on education matters, but he also provides wider advice on housing, immigration, health (e.g. accessing the NHS), and unemployment. He has run workshops in the schools on the UK education system and healthy eating. A project worker reported that, as a result of the intervention, the Turkish and Kurdish parents feel less isolated, are more involved with their children’s education, have a better relationship with the school, and their children’s school attendance has improved.

(Ronicle, et al, 2014, p.25)

SCHOOL STAFF

The projects were asked whether there were any training implications for teachers, support staff and other professionals on this theme. The Bridgend 'Action for Children' project stated: that there are not any specific types of training that school professionals need, but there is a need for them to be able to gain the trust of families. They believe that the main breakdown in communication is related to parents feeling like they cannot trust school professionals (for fear of being passed on to statutory services or having had bad experiences at school in the past). The project argues that any training which could positively impact upon these often strained relationships would be beneficial.

The Croydon 'Family Power' project believed that schools need more training about identifying domestic abuse and what they can do to assist families. They believe that schools need more training about domestic abuse – that school staff are not always fully aware of the extent and nature of domestic abuse, or routes to signpost people for support.

Conclusion

Flexibility and persistence are key when you wish to establish a service in a school. A school has many priorities and you may find it takes a long time before you make progress. Having a clear offer, consistent communication and a member of staff who understands how schools operate are noted above as being highly beneficial.

If you build your service with early intervention and a whole-family approach in mind, you are in a strong position to not only positively impact progress within a school, but also the wider community.

Operating a project in a school can increase the support available for both the school and families. As one teacher described:

“ We manage to get resources into those families at an early stage, which alleviates, predominantly, the need to go down social services route...The success of having the project was before it was just teachers, school nurse, and we would try to think, 'What can we put in place for these families?', and with [the Improving Futures project being based in the school], often they can say to us, 'Oh, that's something the...project can do', so straightaway we've got something.
(Teacher)

Follow the links to learn more about the [Improving Futures Project](#) and its sponsor, the [Big Lottery Fund](#).

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