



Listening to parents: a short guide

RESEARCH & POLICY FOR THE REAL WORLD

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Listening to parents is key to planning and delivering effective services and policy for families and children.

Many people who work with children and families need to understand parents' views on services – in schools, children's centres or other early years settings; in social service teams, youth justice and anti-social behaviour teams.

Local authorities are pioneering ways to understand parents' views on services to help them make decisions and commission services that parents want for themselves and for their children. Some are appointing specialist staff to ensure this happens and others rely on many people throughout the local authority to find ways to listen to parents' views.

This short guide is for people working in services for children and families and local authorities who want to listen to parents' views on services and local authority policies. It is designed to offer clear guidance based on research into what works when listening to parents, with some practical ideas about how to listen to parents effectively.

Why do we need to consult with parents?

The term 'parents' includes anyone who is bringing up children.

- Parents are the experts on their family's needs and wishes and can offer a grounded understanding of how best services can support families.
- Services developed with input from parents are much more likely to be useful and well attended.
- Parental involvement in their children's play and learning influences children's outcomes more than any other factor – so seeking their views on services and on spending decisions will help to build parental involvement and boost children's chances.
- Well-handled, transparent consultation builds parental trust and confidence in services.

Challenges for those who are seeking out parents' views

Challenges that face those who are seeking out parents' views include:

- Finding questions to ask parents where there is a real chance that their views may make a difference.
- Coordinating the work of different people in different services and teams who are looking for parents' views.
- Engaging leadership – for example, elected members, chief executives and senior managers – in seeking out parents' views and ensuring they are listened to.
- Explaining to parents that local authorities have to consult them about services for their families and for children – and that their voices do matter.
- Making sure the same groups of parents are not returned to over and over again – some parents feel 'over-consulted' and may feel conned if their views are not implemented.
- Ensuring all parents consulted get feedback about results.
- Ensuring seldom heard groups of parents are included.
- Not using jargon – which may make efforts to engage parents almost incomprehensible. One council began its letter seeking views from the public with the following opening sentence: *“The Council is seeking the views of the community and other stakeholders on preferred options for the Core Strategy, part of the emerging Local Development Framework (LDF) that will eventually replace the existing Unitary Development Plan (UDP)”*.

Legislation and guidance around consultation with parents

Getting parents' views and input on the services we provide is not an optional extra, but is a core part of efforts to improve services. Below is a quick guide to the legislation and key guidance documents showing where action is required to seek out parents' views:

Every Parent Matters sets out the overall framework and support that the Government aims to give parents so that they can help children achieve the best education possible. <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=11184>

The Children Act 2004 provides for Joint Area Reviews to be held every three years. These reviews cover publicly funded services for children and young people, including those that are directly managed or commissioned by the council, as well as services provided by the health and youth justice services. Ofsted guidance stipulates that these reviews will take account of the views of children and young people and their parents and carers. <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>

The Children Act required all local authorities to produce a Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) by 2006, and to review it annually. *The Annual Review of*

the CYPP (Supplementary Guidance 2007) requires consultation with those who have parental responsibility or the care of children.

Local authorities are also required to develop a strategy for commissioning parenting support in their area. *Parenting Support: Guidance for Local Authorities in England (2006)* states that there should be extensive consultation with children, young people, families and local communities.

<http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/resources-and-practices/IG00169/>

Under the Childcare Act 2006, local authorities are required to do a childcare sufficiency assessment every three years, and to be proactive in seeking the views of parents, employers, providers and the wider community. www.surestart.gov.uk

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 places new duties on local authorities to increase parental voice in planning and securing the provision of school places and places an explicit duty on local authorities to respond formally to parents seeking changes to the provision of schools in their areas. All schools must now have regard to the views of parents and the local CYPP. Trust schools (where the majority of the governing body are appointed, not elected) will have to set up a Parent Council. <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2006/20060040.htm>

Steps to success

Leadership and coordination

Someone has to push consultation with parents forward, as it will not happen on its own. This could be a specialist worker, a parents' 'champion', or a steering group. Leadership backing is essential. Elected members and senior staff will need to be involved if parents' views are to make a real difference.

In large organisations a dedicated worker can coordinate approaches to parents and push through action in response to parents. Sometimes a strategic link with other organisations consulting their users can add value – Primary Care Trusts, for example, consult their users and this will include parents.

Although someone has to take a lead, parental consultation is everyone's responsibility. Staff will need training, support and practical help to achieve this.

Be clear about your purpose

It is essential to be crystal clear about what you are asking parents about and why. Be upfront about your purpose. Questions should address clear and specific issues, not vague concepts. There is no point consulting unless you know what you want to learn and change as a result of the process. Parents, understandably, tend to be much more interested in the experiences of their own children. But you can interest them in wider issues that affect the whole community by choosing questions very carefully and framing them in a way that invites opinion.

Horses for courses

There is no single ideal method for engaging with parents or any other group of service users. We need to offer parents a variety of ways to become involved, so that they can choose the level of involvement that meets their needs. A range of approaches is best, so that parents with different capacities and attitudes will find it possible to participate.

Practical arrangements will depend upon the parents whose views you are seeking. These arrangements are critical to success and may need to include:

- Careful timing so that targeted groups of parents can make it.
- Incentives – may be vouchers or a tasty lunch or just the chance to be heard on an issue the parents think is important.
- Crèches or childcare expenses.
- Help with travel.
- Support from key workers or outreach staff.
- 'Common interest' themed groups for marginalised parents – e.g. parents of children with long-term medical conditions – who might not speak out in a group exploring lots of different issues.
- Feedback for use on CVs showing the value of the experience to individuals.

Include the seldom heard

Consider who you need to hear from. Specific efforts are always needed to reach out to seldom heard groups of parents. Depending upon the questions you want to ask, you might want to target, say, parents with disabilities, parents from a specific ethnic minority group or fathers who don't live with their children.

The best way of reaching groups that are often marginalised is to work through groups with direct links to target communities. Many specialist organisations based in and working with local communities will have spent a great deal of time building trust and establishing their reputation with parents who may not easily engage with mainstream services.

“It's got to be diverse...diversity of the cultural mix, everything...You'd have parents with children with special needs, foster parents or adoptive parents, and parents who don't have English as their first language...”

(Mother, Greenford BME focus group, Parental Voice Project 2006).

Ensuring impact

Parents can often be sceptical or mistrustful about the intentions of local authorities and service providers. Trust will be built if you can be explicit about the range of priorities expressed by parents and explain how the results of the

consultation exercise will be used in making or influencing policy and decisions. Always find ways to tell the parents you listened to what actually happened in the end.

“*I think your biggest incentive for me would be that the people are going to listen to what you're saying and something's going to be done.*”

(Father, Birmingham focus group, Parental Voice project 2006.)

Possible consultation methods

Research carried out by Family and Parenting Institute and the National Consumer Council shows that a range of approaches to parents is needed, according to the type of questions being asked. That way, parents with different capacities and attitudes will find it possible to make their voices heard.

A group of parents suggested these methods for use within a school community:

- School web-logs.
- E-surveys on big issues such as SATs.
- Monthly school 'surgeries', like those run by MPs.
- School-based parents' panels to support and advise 'new' parents – which could be based on Starting School workshops for parents whose children are entering primary and secondary school.
- Bringing parents together across the county or local area.

Other tried and tested ideas for smaller scale local organisations include:

- Community journals.
- Group walks, shared meals, workshops and events.
- Photo/ideas walls where people can post thoughts.

Bristol Citizens' Panel

Bristol City Council set up a panel of 2000 residents to engage with them around planning policy and strategy. Additionally it set up a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) booster panel of 150. An external company carries out recruitment. Panel members complete up to four questionnaires a year either on paper or electronically, usually covering several different issues. Survey results are passed to the relevant service managers, senior Council officers and elected councillors, or external partners. Panel members are kept informed of the results of the surveys via a newsletter, and results often appear in local media or are used in other Council publications and press releases. Panel members are also invited to take part in citizens' juries (for example on health and social care in 2006).

This example is drawn from the *Involve* guide to public participation (see references at the end of this guide).

Kent Children's Trust 'Meet the Family' Project

Kent Children's Trust is working on a 'Meet the Family' project as part of its wider parent support strategy, with support from the Family and Parenting Institute.

The project aims are:

- To provide an opportunity for Kent Children's Trust members to genuinely engage with parents.
- To listen and learn from parents – who will be invited to raise key issues that face them as they raise their children and put questions to senior Kent representatives.
- To gather parents' views on how Kent Children's Trust should listen to the voices of parents.
- To inform and shape the action planning which will support the delivery of the Parent Support Strategy and Parent's Charter.
- To signal Kent's intention to develop better ways of listening to parents' views.

A parents' meeting is planned to kick off the Meet the Family project and will offer parents the chance to put questions to strategic leaders, such as "How do I find child care that fits with my work?" In return, service providers will get the opportunity to hear the issues that face parents in their day-to-day lives and use the feedback to inform decisions and policymaking.

St John's Primary School, Tower Hamlets

Excellent work is being done by many schools to consult with parents on a variety of issues. This is more likely to happen in those schools that have a member of staff dedicated to working with parents.

St John's Primary School in Tower Hamlets, East London, ran a successful family learning consultation in partnership with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). It included a questionnaire to parents and a parents' event. Questionnaires were sent out with a flyer advertising the consultation event; an item appeared in the newsletter; the WEA ran a playground event to remind parents, create interest and get more people to fill in the questionnaires. The school identified the following success factors after the event:

- There was an effective partnership between the WEA and the school.
- The playground event helped create a buzz, enabling conversations with parents.
- The parents' event was well planned and resourced.
- A well-equipped crèche was provided.
- The Head and school keeper were in the playground from 9am encouraging parents to attend, and the Head came to part of the event.
- Notices were up in the playground and in school reminding parents of the event.
- Interpreters were provided.
- The event included fun activities and a prize draw.

e-Networks

Much can be learned from successful parent-generated e-networks, such as Netmums and Mumsnet. Netmums is an online community for mothers and fathers with (or expecting) young children. The site claims 275,000 registered users spread across a family of local websites in which each local website is edited and maintained by a local parent with support from a central team. The site provides advice and support for parents about bringing up their children, along with local listings of other services.

References that may help:

Involve (2005) *People and Participation – How to put citizens at the heart of decision-making*.

Welsh Assembly Government (2006) *Parent Participation: Practice Guide for Children and Young People's Partnerships*

Family Policy Alliance (2005) *Parent Participation: Improving services for children and families*.

Teaching Development Agency (2007) *Consultation Toolkit: Community consultation tools to support the development of extended services*.

National Consumer Council at www.ncc.org.uk

Family and Parenting Institute website at www.familyandparenting.org for updates on this area of work.

More about this area of work

This guide is based on research and experience developed by the Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) and the National Consumer Council (NCC).

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