

## Section 7: Involving Parents and Carers

This section of the toolkit is about working in partnership with parents and carers<sup>1</sup>. The Code of Practice expects practitioners to engage parents in decision-making throughout the SEN process.

It is important because parents know and understand their child best and the participation of parents is vital to ensure that all those involved with their child are working towards shared and agreed outcomes for the individual child.

### Strong partnership between practitioners and parents

Central to high quality practice in the early years is the setting's policy and practice in relation to working in partnership with parents and carers. The impact of high quality early years provision is significantly linked to the effectiveness of partnership with parents.

EYFS overarching principle:

...children learn and develop well in **enabling environments**, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers.

DfE (2014) *Statutory Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage*

Settings are expected to engage with the parents of all the children in the setting, but the focus on parents' participation increases where there is a cause for concern about the child's progress.

...throughout the early years, if a child's progress in any prime area gives cause for concern, practitioners must discuss this with the child's parents and/or carers and agree how to support the child. Practitioners must consider whether a child may have a special educational need or disability which requires specialist support. They should link with, and help families to access, relevant services from other agencies as appropriate.

DfE (2014) *Statutory Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage*, para 1.6

### Principles in the Children and Families Act

Practice for children with SEN should be firmly based in good practice for all children. Key principles written in to the Children and Families Act build on the requirements of the EYFS and include principles that set the direction for parental participation. Particularly relevant are the principles that focus on the importance of:

- the wishes, views and feelings of children and their parents;
- promoting the participation of parents in decision-making; and
- information and support to enable parents to participate in decision-making.

These three principles work together and settings bring them together in their working partnership with parents. The three elements are considered in turn, below:

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the toolkit, 'parent' is used to include mothers, fathers, and anyone who has parental responsibility for a child and who cares for the child.

# 1

## Wishes, views and feelings of children and their parents

Parents have a wealth of knowledge about their children not only in their home environment but in a variety of other situations. It may be parents who first voice a concern about their child's learning or development.

Local authorities, early years providers and schools should enable parents to share their knowledge about their child and give them confidence that their views and contributions are valued and will be acted upon.

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, para 1.7

The child's key person is likely to be parents' first port of call. Each child must be assigned a key person. This is an EYFS learning and development requirement and an EYFS safeguarding and welfare requirement.

Providers must inform parents and/or carers of the name of the key person, and explain their role, when a child starts attending a setting.

- The key person must help ensure that every child's learning and care is tailored to meet their individual needs.
- The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home.
- They should also help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate.

DfE (2014) *Statutory Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage*, para 1.10

The requirement for a key person for each child provides a starting point from which to build a trusting and open relationship between the setting and parents. If at any point there are emerging concerns, these can be raised within the context of an existing relationship.

All those who work with young children should be alert to emerging difficulties and respond early. In particular, parents know their children best and it is important that all practitioners listen and understand when parents express concerns about their child's development. They should also listen to and address any concerns raised by children themselves.

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, para 5.5

The Children and Families Act promotes children's participation and the principles highlight the importance of taking into account the wishes, views and feelings of children themselves. Children express their wishes, views and feelings in a range of ways. Practitioners should establish the child's preferred means of communication and, whether the child uses spoken language or alternative forms of communication, can support interactions and enhance dialogue by using visual prompts, objects and pictures to encourage children to show what they like doing and what they find difficult. Practitioners can also understand children's views by careful observation of their behaviour, the choices they make, their disposition and engagement with learning. There is more about observations in *Section 4: First concerns and early identification*. It is vital to the success of any action taken through SEN support that it is informed by the views of children themselves. Their views need to inform discussion and decisions at each stage.

It is also important that, from an early age, children are encouraged to reflect on the choices they make and communicate them. From the point where children reach the end of compulsory schooling, they themselves take on the right to participate in decision-making.

Unless children are encouraged to make choices from an early age, they will find it difficult to take on the responsibilities at 16.

## 2 Promoting the participation of parents in decision-making

The Code is clear that parents should participate in the earliest decisions about children with SEN including in the initial decision about whether or not a child has a special educational need. To inform this decision, all the information about the child should be brought together and considered with the child's parent/carer. The discussion would normally be between the key person, the SENCO and the parent/carer and, where appropriate an Area SENCO or other professional. The meeting considers whether the child has a special educational need or whether there are other explanations for the concerns expressed or the delay observed. There is more information in *Section 4: First concerns and early identification*.

Where a setting identifies a child as having SEN they **must** work in partnership with parents to establish the support the child needs... Parents should be involved in planning support and, where appropriate, in reinforcing the provision or contributing to progress at home.

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, paras 5.37/5.41

Where a child is identified as having SEN, parents are part of the decision-making process about the next steps and the graduated approach, through SEN Support<sup>2</sup>. The practitioner and the SENCO should agree, in consultation with the parent:

- The outcomes they are seeking for the child
- The interventions and support to be put in place
- The expected impact on progress, development, behaviour
- Date for review

Parents should be engaged throughout the cycle of action: assess, plan, do, review. Their views should inform decisions about how their child should be supported in the setting, whether special educational provision through SEN support is still required, whether more specialist external assessment may be called for, whether staff require more specialist external advice or the child requires more specialist support, or whether their child may require an EHC needs assessment. There is more about the involvement of parents in the graduated approach in *Section 5: SEN Support in the Early years – A Graduated Approach*.

## 3 Information and support to enable parents to participate in decision-making

One of the key principles in the Children and Families Act and the Code of Practice is the importance of the child or young person, and the child's parents, being provided with the information and support necessary to enable them to participate in decision-making.

The EYFS requires all providers to make information available to parents about how the setting supports disabled children and children with SEN. As well as policy and practice information, there is a range of information that settings share with all parents. Information is shared informally, on a daily basis, and more formally at key points, such as the two-year

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<sup>2</sup> The Code of Practice promotes person-centred approaches. Helen Sanderson Associates have a wide range of resources to support this approach: <http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk> This includes practical tools that are useful in exploring with parents 'What is important to my child?' 'What is important for my child?' 'How best to support my child?' and the use of One Page Profiles.

old check. Where the setting thinks a child has, or may have, SEN they must bring information together and consider it with the child's parents, see *Section 4: First concerns and early identification*. Thereafter and throughout the SEN process and whether children are supported through SEN Support or through an EHC plan, it is essential to effective decision-making that information has been shared fully with parents.

Where a child is identified as having SEN, parents and children are entitled to impartial information, advice and support from a local service. Settings can help parents by giving them information about their local Information, Advice and Support Service. Settings can find out about their local Service through the Local Offer or through the Information, Advice and Support Services Network<sup>3</sup>.

Local authorities **must** arrange for children with SEN or disabilities for whom they are responsible, and their parents, and young people with SEN or disabilities for whom they are responsible, to be provided with information and advice about matters relating to their SEN or disabilities, including matters relating to health and social care. This **must** include information, advice and support on the take-up and management of Personal Budgets.

Local authorities **must** take steps to make these services known to children, their parents and young people in their area; [and to others].

[Local authorities] **must** ensure that their Local Offer includes details of how information, advice and support related to SEN and disabilities can be accessed and how it is resourced.

In carrying out their duties under Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014, local authorities **must** have regard to the importance of providing children and their parents and young people with the information and support necessary to participate in decisions.

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, paras 2.1- 2.3

When offering advice and support to parents it is important for settings to be aware of the range of information in the Local Offer and to be able to support parents in finding information they may need.

## Effective parental participation

At times, parents, teachers and others may have differing expectations of how a child's needs are best met. Sometimes these discussions can be challenging but it is in the child's best interests for a positive dialogue between parents, teachers and others to be maintained, to work through points of difference and establish what action is to be taken.

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, paras 1.7

Parental responses to conversations about their child can be varied and complex. It is important that parents feel supported throughout and it may help parents to have a friend or supporter with them in a discussion. Each child and each family is unique and a 'one size fits all' approach will rarely be effective. Ensuring the setting's approach to parental engagement is underpinned by a set of values and principles can help to steer practitioners and can enable settings to approach each discussion, each meeting and each situation sensitively.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iassnetwork.org.uk/>

The National Portage Association and Early Support both promote approaches based on values and principles. The values and principles established by the National Portage Association<sup>4</sup> provide a framework for working with parents of children with SEND.

The National Portage Association Values Statement:

- Every child and every family should be valued for their individuality as diversity brings strength to us all.
- Inclusion and participation of every individual in our community is a right that should be supported and nurtured.
- Parents play the key role in supporting their young child's development.
- Families have the right to make informed choices and decisions for themselves about things that are important to them now and in the future, whilst remaining the child's first ally.
- All children have the right to enjoy the widest range of play experiences, as these are the foundation of learning and development.
- Early childhood is the foundation on which children build the rest of their lives: it is not just a preparation for the next stage – it is vitally important in itself.
- Everyday contacts, relationships and activities are fundamental in nurturing development, quality of life and experience.
- Services for families are most useful when they support everyday living and are delivered within the child's natural environment.
- All children are able to learn. Building on abilities and strengths, rather than focusing on difficulties, best supports their progress.

The Early Support principles<sup>5</sup> and resources also provide a useful starting point for developing an understanding of effective support for parents. The Early Support principles have been mapped across to the principles of The Children and Families Act<sup>6</sup>.

### **Some practicalities in effective communication with parents**

It is important that all practitioners have time to communicate with parents, and the skills and confidence to carry out this part of their role. The SENCO may keep skills and confidence under review with the manager of the setting and plan relevant professional development opportunities.

Effective two way communication includes:

- ✓ Actively seeking and using a variety ways in which parents can contribute their insights to the assessment and planning, interventions and next steps; for some parents this may be a gradual process requiring support from someone they trust.
- ✓ Encouraging parents to think about the outcomes which are important for their child prior to the meeting, this may mean meeting with either the key person or SENCO prior to a meeting.
- ✓ Being aware of all of the ways in which practitioners convey messages, whether face to face, over the phone, by text or email; and through the body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and choice of words used.
- ✓ Demonstrating empathy by acknowledging the way a parent may be feeling or emotions they may be showing in their responses. Be careful not to pre-empt these!

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hub.portage.org.uk>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/earlysupport>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/>

- ✓ Maintaining respect and professionalism.
- ✓ Giving your full attention.
- ✓ Recognising that your own perceptions and experiences are likely to be different from those of the parents; they have unique knowledge of their child.
- ✓ Model an open and non-judgemental style of discussion, using open-ended questions to encourage parents to do as much of the talking as possible.
- ✓ Reflecting back what a parent has said e.g. “I think you may be saying.....” or, “Can I just clarify what you mean...?”
- ✓ Asking parents about their child’s views and taking these into account in discussions and decisions.

**How confident are staff about listening to parents, being able to engage them in decision-making about their child, and enabling them to access information and support?**