

HELPING CHILDREN LEARN

Involving non-resident parents in their children's education – a practical guide for all those working within a learning environment



Produced by Families Need Fathers Scotland
and Children in Scotland

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Introduction

This practical guide has been developed by Children in Scotland (CiS) and Families Need Fathers Scotland (FNF Scotland). Both organisations have been involved for many years in promoting the wellbeing of children through the active support and involvement of both parents, even when they do not live together. Though a non-resident parent may be either a mother or a father, fathers are in the considerable majority.

The pursuit of equality in parenting is an important end in itself and is enshrined in legislation. Of particular importance are the benefits to children and the positive value to their educational attainment that generally follows when both parents are involved in supporting their development as well as the broader school community.

The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006¹ and the accompanying guidance, placed obligations on schools to be active in engaging with parents in general, and non-resident parents in particular, and to work hard to break down barriers that may be perceived as discouraging involvement.

The Act requires each education authority to include progress on its parental involvement strategy in its regular assessments of the quality of education it is providing. Similarly, each school must include objectives and ambitions in respect of parental involvement in its own development plan.

The approach of the 2006 Act is now complemented by the Scottish Government National Parenting Strategy². This strategy sets ambitious aspirations for children coupled with commitment to support parents. The Minister for Children and Young People, Aileen Campbell, has stated that, “If Scotland is to be the best place in the world for children to grow up, it must also be the best place in the world to be a parent.” It makes clear the obligations of all public authorities to ensure that their practice is inclusive and promotes the full participation of parents for the benefit of their children.

Children in Scotland and FNF Scotland sought information from all local authorities in Scotland about their engagement with non-resident parents and the efforts they are making to break down barriers as required by the 2006 Act. A very mixed picture emerged, clearly demonstrating that best practice is not always being delivered.

Schools can find it difficult to manage differing parental expectations when family relationships and communications break down. It is important that schools do not take sides, but encourage a joint approach from both parents that meet the needs of the child. However, non-resident parents frequently report that they have to request persistently to be included, which often leads to them being perceived as being ‘difficult’.

The experience of FNF Scotland and CiS is that when the respective obligations of parents, schools and education authorities are clear and transparent, then the benefits for the children of constructive involvement is increased.

Based on research and evidence, this guide sets out the reasons as to why a school’s parental involvement strategy should ensure parents, particularly non-resident parents, are encouraged and supported to become involved and engaged in their child’s education. It sets out the relevant legislation and highlights what local authorities and schools require to do.

A snapshot of current policy and practice across local authorities is presented. Useful references, case studies and sources of help and information are also provided.

The aim of this guide is to remind schools and local authorities of their duties under the 2006 Act and, in particular, how it relates to involving non-resident parents in their children’s education.

Most of all, we hope it will make a positive difference for children

¹ Scottish Government (2006). Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/8/contents

² Scottish Government (2012). National Parenting Strategy: Making a positive difference to children and young people through parenting. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/10/4789

What the research tells us

A child's progress at school is greatly influenced by the relationship they have with their parents and the degree of parental involvement in their learning. An extensive and growing body of research has highlighted the importance of both parents' input in terms of a child's healthy learning and development.

In its 2008 report, the Department for Children, Schools and Families in England and Wales noted that parental involvement has been shown to have a positive effect on children's educational achievement, even when the influence of other factors have been taken into account.³

Parental involvement and engagement can, of course, take many forms⁴. It can include a parent reading to their child at home, enquiring about their child's progress, attending school events and engaging with their learning. Arguably these factors are closely interlinked, and schools can play an important role in promoting them all.

The positive impact of fathers' support and involvement

More specifically, it is also clear that fathers have a positive role to play in their children's learning and development, whether they are living with them or not.⁵

A number of studies indicate that fathers' engagement in their children's learning through reading with them, helping with homework or demonstrating interest more broadly such as participating in school events can have significant benefits for children in terms of attendance and attainment at school.⁶

Research by McBride et al⁷ indicates that a father's involvement in school settings such as volunteering, going on school trips, talking to school officials and discussing events and activities is associated with better child achievement at school.

CASE STUDY:

"I volunteered to help with reading in my son's school. Wee primary 1 boys and girls – not just my son's group – would come into the library to listen to stories and choose a book to take back to class.

"I didn't realise how important it was just to be visible as a non-resident parent. One day as they were heading back to class, I heard one boy say to my son, "Your dad's really cool". I made it to the playground before bursting into tears of pride".

There is an inconsistency in practice across local authorities and within the same authority. While most parents have a good relationship with their child's school, the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act and the National Parenting Strategy are more ambitious about the quality of the collaboration they could achieve. The guidance accompanying the Act sets out the importance of ensuring effective, respectful channels of communication and stipulates that both parents must be treated equally and with equal respect.

How the law currently affects non-resident parents

Who is a parent?

A parent is defined in section 135(1) of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 as: "Parent includes guardian and any person who is liable to maintain or has parental responsibilities (within the meaning of section 1(3) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 in relation to, or has care of a child or young person." The Act covers state schools and pre-school nursery classes. It does not cover the independent sector.

³ Department for Children, Schools, and Families note in their (2008). The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education. London (p. 8)

⁴ Desforges, C. and Abouchar, A. (2003) The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review. DfES Research Report 433.

⁵ Fatherhood Institute (2010). Fathers' impact on their children's learning and achievement. London.

⁶ Goldman, R. (2005). Fathers' Involvement in their Children's Education. London: National Family and Parenting Institute.

⁷ McBride, B.A., Schoppe-Sullivan S.J., & Ho, M.H. (2005). The mediating role of fathers' school involvement on students' achievement. Applied Developmental Psychology, 26, 201-216.

⁸ Scottish Government (2006), Guidance on the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/09/08094112/0#

It is an obligation that each local authority should publish its Parental Involvement Strategy and evaluate and review it regularly. Within the strategy, there should be a section on how it engages with non-resident parents. There is a separate duty on each school to spell out its system for engaging parents in its own development plan.

What is a non-resident parent entitled to?

Family relationships can be complex. Appropriate arrangements need to be put in place to accommodate and reflect the diversity of families.

Fathers must be treated as parents for the purposes of statutory education rights unless their rights have been withdrawn after due process.

Feedback from non-resident parents show that this is where relationships between them and schools can break down. Schools are advised to take legal advice if they are unsure.

While we have emphasised the importance of relationship building between the school and both resident and non-resident parents and carers to promote broader engagement, there is a statutory entitlement for the non-resident parent enshrined in the Pupils' Educational Records (Scotland) Regulations 2003.

Schools should also consider how they would support the continued involvement of parents who do not live with their children, particularly in relation to meeting a child or young person's educational needs.

Educational Records are not set out in regulations, but a non-resident parent should expect to receive copies of correspondence, including the child's school report and attendance/absence and any welfare/disciplinary issues.

For example, non-resident parents should receive their own notification of parents' nights at which they can discuss their child's general progress and attainment. A non-resident parent is entitled to ask for a separate appointment if they are unable to attend. This may be particularly appropriate when

parents do not wish to have direct contact with each other or where one is looking after the children to allow the other to attend. Primary schools can accommodate such requests more easily than a secondary school where pupils have several subject teachers.

Parents should be encouraged to work together in the interests of the child. If it is genuinely impossible or likely to lead to conflict, either parent should feel able to make an appointment with the child's named Guidance Teacher to discuss progress or make alternative arrangements without being made to feel s/he is a problem.

When can the school refuse to provide records?

The general assumption in policy and law is that schools should treat both parents equally and that they should be entitled to the same information about their child.

A non-resident parent is entitled to information about their children even if they have no direct contact unless there is a court order prohibiting it. The preferences of the parent with care should not be accepted as a veto unless it falls within the criteria set out in the Act under which the school is **not permitted** to disclose information.

Section 6 of The Pupils' Educational Records (Scotland) Regulations 2003 sets out the statutory basis for withholding information.

These are:

- If its disclosure would, in the opinion of the school, be likely to cause significant distress or harm to the pupil or any other person.
- It consists of a training/employment reference by the school for the purposes of the education, training or employment (prospective or otherwise) of the pupil.
- It is covered by certain sections of the Data Protection Act 1998 (Section 2, 30(2) or 38(1)).

The grounds for withholding access to records were significantly changed by The Pupils' Educational Records (Scotland) Regulations 2003. The preceding School Pupil Records (Scotland) Regulations 1990 was updated to comply with the Data Protection Act.

An establishment cannot refuse to disclose records simply because one parent and/or child or young person does not want the other parent to have access. Consent is not required from one parent for disclosure of information to any other parent. Headteachers should take the views of parents, children and young people and, where appropriate, legal advice.

Active involvement

Local authority policies should enable and encourage schools to engage effectively with parents, both resident and non-resident.

The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 imposes two key duties on each education authority in Scotland; a duty to promote the involvement of parents in their child's education (Section 1) and a duty to prepare a 'Strategy for Parental Involvement' (Section 2).

Annexe B to the Guidance that accompanies the Act provides a checklist to which local authorities should have regard in developing their strategy for parental involvement.

In 2006 the Scottish Government and Education Scotland, in partnership with a variety of parental and family organisations produced the Parents as partners in their children's learning toolkit. The toolkit is currently under review.

Legislation

The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act (2000)¹⁰ places a requirement upon local authorities to prepare and publish an "annual statement of education improvement objectives" (section 5(2)).

This statement:

"...shall include an account –

(a) of the ways in which the authority will seek to involve parents in promoting the education of their children;

(b) of the ways in which they will, in providing school education, encourage equal opportunities and in particular the observance of the equal opportunity requirements."

Practical guidance

Developing good policies and delivering good practice: policy guidelines

The Guidance to the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act emphasises that the school should welcome all parents and show equal respect to parents who do not live together. Engagement with fathers in general and with non-resident fathers in particular is identified as an area of focus for active, continuing attention.

Non-resident parents can feel judged, or likely to be judged. They can have low self-confidence and doubt whether they can support their child's learning, and wider life of the school or community.

CASE STUDY:

"I phoned up the school to say that my son's mother and I were now separated and that I wanted to give my contact details.

"The school receptionist came across as very hostile and reeled of a list of the evidence I'd need to give them to prove who I was.

"I felt like I was suddenly a stranger – even though I was the same dad I was before we separated – and now to be treated as suspect".

¹⁰ Scottish Executive (2000) Standard in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000 www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2000/6/contents

Schools should consider how they can routinely keep parents informed in relation to parents' evenings, attendance, exclusion, sports days and other school events, general information about the school and attainment information, etc., regarding their child.

In addition, parents should be fully involved in the planning processes in relation to meeting the child or young person's educational needs. It is important that education authorities and schools do as much as they can to support the continued involvement of parents who don't live with their children.

In doing so, authorities and schools must be sensitive to the needs and wishes of both parents, who may not always agree. It is also important that education authorities and schools pay particular regard to the views of the child or young person in such circumstances.

Developing good policy and practice guidelines on engaging with non-resident parents should be positive in language and tone. It may be necessary/good practice to create a separate resource with the FAQs of non-resident parents.

Examples of such FAQs may be:

- Who is the best person to speak to regarding my child's progress?
- What information does the school need me to show that establishes my status as my child's parent?
- How can I make sure that I'm informed about parents' nights, concerts and other events in the school community?
- Does my former partner have the right of refusal on how the school interacts with me?
- Who should I speak to if I'm worried about my child's progress at school?

Putting policy into practice

While having good policy guidelines is the first step, ensuring that policies are turned into good practice can present another challenge. It is crucial that staff understand the importance of this issue and how to deliver best practice.

Local authorities should continue to raise awareness amongst all staff (through CLPL sessions, training events) of the benefits and legislative requirements of parent involvement.

Parental involvement and engagement should be embedded across all aspects of the school / establishment.

Common issues

A common situation arises when a parent with residence (with whom the child lives most of the time) tells the school they do not wish the non-resident parent to be involved and does not wish the school to communicate with them. This is often presented as a "difficulty" for the school.

The legal situation is clear that unless the non-resident parent has had parental rights and responsibilities removed or there is a court order of some sort restricting contact, then the school should engage with him or her as with any other parent. Neither parent has a right of veto over the school's contact with the other. Keep in mind that many separated parents do not have a formal court order or legal agreement of any kind.

The second most common example is where the parents have been to court and the non-resident parent has secured a court order specifying contact hours or days. The parent with care sometimes takes the order to the school and insists the non-resident parent is forbidden to have any contact at any other time.

Such an order should not be taken as a restriction on overall parental rights and responsibilities unless it explicitly says so. Some schools have mistakenly taken it to mean the non-resident parent is not allowed to act as a volunteer in school activities such as football training or reading support if his son or daughter might be present.

Case studies

When engaging with parents it is important to remember, as we also note below, that there's a world of difference between a document that begins with a welcome and gives information on the contribution that a non-resident parent can make and one that begins with the list of documents and identifications that the school will require before acknowledging him or her.

It should also be written in a way that is useful and easily understood by the parent with principal residence, in the hope that by clarifying the school's obligations to both parents it will reduce the instances in which it is pressed to "take sides". In our experience, most parents prefer to live up to high expectations rather than low ones.

It is helpful for the school to put together a list of initiatives in each school area which aim to engage parents, such as a maths club or homework guidelines for parents.

Prestonpans Infant School, East Lothian

Prestonpans Infant School in East Lothian operates a list of parents – including non-resident parents – whom they text about school events. The school also runs a number of events for fathers, both resident and non-resident.

These events include activities for Father's Day (as well as for Mother's Day) and highlight collaboration with local organisations working with fathers, such as local activity mornings for fathers and kids.

Further to this, by arrangement with the headteacher or the management team, non-resident parents with supervised or very restricted contact with their children are given the opportunity to come to the school out of hours to see their child's classroom and to meet their child's teacher.

The lists need to be kept up-to-date with current contact details and should be readily available to teachers. This is a mechanism for supporting school level activity within the overall council parental involvement strategy.

A checklist for parental engagement might include the following:

- On admission, check both parent/carer names and contact details. If you don't ask, you might not get both.
- Establish rights and responsibilities of each parent: e.g. residence of child, contact arrangements, shared residence.
- Make contact with the non-resident parent if contact details available.
- If no contact details are available, work with other professionals e.g. community support, social work and/or do targeted outreach work to establish a productive contact with non-resident parents.
- Ensure relevant staff know there is a non-resident parent. Remind them on an annual basis.
- Ensure all staff know how the school communicates and stays in contact with parents and carers, and the type of information that is shared.
- Publish a leaflet outlining how non-resident parents can engage with the school so it can be given to all non-resident parents. The information should also be given a separate page on each school website.
- Identify parents who are not engaging with the school and make an effort to encourage them in an appropriate manner.

South Lanarkshire Council

South Lanarkshire Council has made a priority of engaging with and promoting the importance of fathers and male carers in their children's life. The importance of including fathers is inscribed into council policies and service plans, and is promoted across all services.

Over a number of years, efforts have been made to reach out to fathers and to gather evidence from them on their needs and priorities. This evidence has then been used to inform policy and service delivery.

For example, informed by evidence gathered through regular surveys with local fathers and male carers, the Community Learning and Home School Partnership Service (CLHSP) has developed a number of initiatives aimed at increasing father involvement.

This includes an annual Family Man Fun Day at which local fathers (and other carers) are encouraged to come along and do activities with their children; the setting up of the Promoting the Role Of Fathers' Figures (PROFF) group which organises days out for children and their father (or another significant male person in their life) as well as organising activities which seek to engage fathers in cooking, art, or woodwork.

A recent initiative, 'Making Fathers Figure', aims to change the culture across early years services to ensure that dads are routinely included in all aspects of their child's development and education. The project includes the establishment of a cross-agency working group, a consultation event with fathers to establish the kind of "father friendly" information and materials fathers would like to have available, and finally, an evaluation of these materials and sharing of results across services.

While this particular initiative focuses on the early years period, it highlights important lessons for anchoring father engagement initiatives with school-age children within existing council services. Firstly, it highlights the importance of creating a

culture change to make sure fathers are routinely actively included. Secondly, it emphasises the need to approach this in a holistic manner that not only involves schools, but also other relevant services such as health and social work. In publicity materials, the term "parent/carers" is replaced with "mum, dad and other carer".

A final aspect of good practice to note is the involvement and informing of staff. In South Lanarkshire, staff have received training on the importance of parent and, in particular, father involvement.

Some real experiences of fathers, children, and schools

CASE STUDY I:

"I wrote to the manager of the nursery where my three-year old daughter had been enrolled (without any discussion with me, but let that pass). I thought it better to write and introduce myself as D's father and arrange an appointment to go in and meet the manager and staff rather than phone out of the blue. I explained that D stayed with me every other weekend and that I wanted to support her in her activities in the nursery.

"The next thing I knew was a text from my ex-wife telling me the nursery had been in touch with her and any communication with them would have to be through her.

"Apart from the discourtesy in communicating with my ex-wife before bothering to reply to me, it seemed to illustrate an attitude that my relationship with the nursery would be contingent on the approval of my ex. I had expected to be asked to confirm that I was her father and that I had full parental rights and responsibilities.

"Of course, security is important. I didn't expect them to offer my ex-wife an effective veto. I know a nursery's legal obligation is to keep both parents actively involved for the benefit of the children involved, but, to be honest, I still feel I am an afterthought and a bit of an irritation to them".

CASE STUDY 2:

“I do get a copy of my daughter’s annual report through the post. However, I know there is a page at the back of the copy she takes home for her comments and her mother’s comments. Somebody in the school makes the effort to remove that page from my copy. I don’t know why. I haven’t made a fuss about it, but why would the school do that?”

CASE STUDY 3:

“I wrote to my daughter’s new secondary school to check that they had my contact details for her school report and information about parents’ night. I had had both of these during her time at primary school and there had never been any problem. I had separate parents’ night appointments and got to know her teachers pretty well.

“I have full parental rights and responsibilities in terms of the Children (Scotland) Act even through her mother’s hostility has made direct contact impossible. But she’s still my daughter and I regard it as my duty to be aware of her progress. Maybe one day she’ll appreciate that I showed all the interest I could.

“However, the school replies that they wouldn’t send me anything on the grounds that it might cause ‘distress’. They refused to discuss how they had come to that decision or meet me to discuss it.

“They had taken advice from the Council’s legal officer, they said. I don’t know whether it was my daughter or ‘another person’ who might be distressed. I don’t know what enquiry the school made into this ‘distress’ or whether that’s it forever.

“Does she get to change her mind – if she even knows about it? I am now shut out and it was made clear to me that it wouldn’t be in my interest to persist”.

Useful links

Education Scotland

www.educationscotland.gov.uk

Engaging with Families

engagingwithfamilies.co.uk

Parentzone Scotland

www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/

Links to Professional Learning Communities on GLOW

Family Learning at home

www.bit.ly/familylearningathome

Parent at home

www.bit.ly/parentathome



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This guide has been created by Families Need Fathers Scotland, and Children in Scotland.

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Children in Scotland

Children in Scotland is the united voice for the children's sector in Scotland. Our vision is to make Scotland a world leader in achieving the wellbeing of every child and improving the quality of every childhood, working with our 400 membership organisations who inform our stance on issues affecting children, young people, families and those who work for them.

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User guide

Families Need Fathers Scotland has published a companion 'user guide', to this report to help non-resident parents engage effectively with their children's school.

<http://tinyurl.com/zxdcayv>