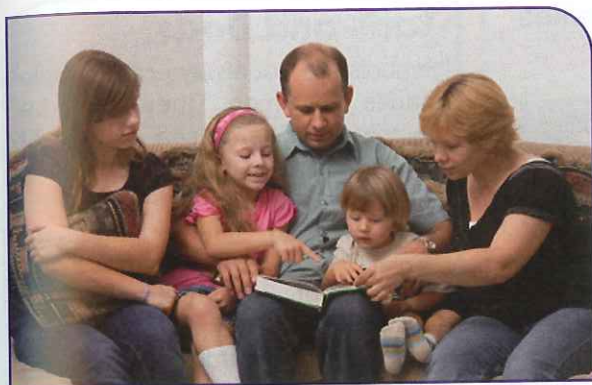


Think family

Expanding the concept of partnerships with parents to include the entire family is key to working with children with special needs, says **Barry Carpenter**



In the 21st Century, families are far more the day-to-day reality for children than 'just' parents. Parents are an integral part of families, and key as they are to every child, the modern reality is that many children find that other family members undertake a significant care-giving role. Consequently, it is important that schools shift the focus from talking only of 'partnership with parents' to 'partnership with families' – that wider group of supporters who are involved in the cycle of upbringing.

So, what constitutes 'a family?' In the European Union the traditional family (a mother and father in a married relationship with two children) is the reality for only one child in seven. Families are important to the infrastructure of society:

Families are big, small, extended, nuclear, multi-generational, with one parent, two parents, and grandparents. We live under one roof or many. A family can be as temporary as a few weeks, as permanent as forever. We become part of a family by birth, adoption, marriage, or from a desire for mutual support. A family is a culture unto itself, with different values and unique ways of realising its dreams. Together, our families become the source of our rich cultural heritage and spiritual diversity. Our families create neighbourhoods, communities, states and nations.

The challenge for schools is therefore 'family engagement' – who are they engaged with? The model illustrated here advocates an extended family support network that values the self-defined family.

Demographics and social change

mean that many families, even when blood-related, do not necessarily live close to each other, as was the case just a few decades ago. Grandparenting, for example, can be conducted across continents on a very regular basis by email, mobile phone, text messaging, webcam

Schools can do much to promote family cohesion

Facebook. Many schools will experience regular and proactive contact with grandparents, yet recent research has shown that while they are a significant family resource, they are currently practically ignored. Grandparents should be part of the educational, social and cultural activities of school life, bringing their own personal views, experience and their own history. In the current climate, grandparents are increasingly shouldering large amounts of responsibility and offering direct assistance to families through child-minding and practical and financial support.

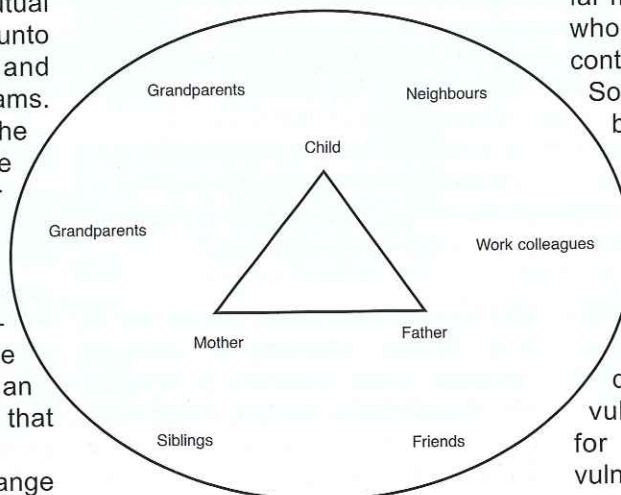
Schools can do much to promote family cohesion, at a time when many of the traditional community hubs for family life have vanished or are under threat. There is a role, especially when a student has special educational needs, for considering the contributions of siblings, particularly where it is known that they are closely involved in the life of their brother or sister. They may be the ones that offer homework support or organise appropriate social activities. In black and minority ethnic communities, where English is an additional language, older siblings often act as interpreters. Are siblings ever invited to make a written contribution to an annual review meeting, or even attend as an advocate for their brother/sister with SEN?

New partnerships

Many schools have established excellent working relationships with parents, gently nurtured over many years. These form the basis of the new partnership of engagement that schools now need to forge with families. Partnership with families is a far more inclusive term. It promotes a whole family pathway, valuing the contribution of key family members.

Some of these members may not be blood relatives: neighbours and family friends often offer childcare and are key in supporting mobile 21st-century families.

The Coalition Government in its statements on children with special educational needs and disabilities, claimed that 'supporting vulnerable children is a priority for the Government'. Certainly, vulnerability is a thread that unifies



Eight building blocks for creating partnership with families

Indicator	Key question
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Does your school policy speak of 'partnership with parents'? Is this an accurate reflection of practice? > Are there family representatives, other than parents, on your governing or advisory groups?
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > If you have a designated space, is it labelled 'Parents Room'? Could it be renamed 'Family Room'? > What mechanisms have you made explicit for families to make contact for advice, guidance etc?
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Do you have a link family scheme, where (with consent) families of new children with SEN are put in touch with existing families (perhaps on the basis of similar need, for example asthma, diabetes, dyslexia)? > Are there resources, electronic or otherwise, that families can access which deepen their understanding and insight into their child's needs?
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Do you offer workshops for families of students on your SEN register to brief them on specific strategies they could use at home? > Do you offer anything specifically for 'other' family members, such as events for dads, or 'sibshops' (workshops for siblings who may carry particular issues about a sibling with special needs)?
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Do you have packs of resource materials available for families to use at home? > Is there a shared electronic forum where families can review resources, comment on initiatives or access high quality information (for example facts on autism, dyslexia)?
Liaison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Are your review or individual education plan meetings open to any family members with a contribution to make? > How inclusive is your correspondence with the home? Does it always begin 'Dear parents', or could it be 'Dear family members'? Are your facilities clearly 'All welcome'?
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Are your communication pathways flexible, and inclusive of all family members? Do you know who you are communicating with? Do your records only record the names of mother and father or do they record siblings, grandparents and others on a 'Who supports the child?' basis? > Are the child's achievements profiled in such a way that they can be shared with the supporting family group? (Maybe through a DVD of video clips, or a photographic achievement diary?)
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The family is always the richest source of information about the child. In seeking to address the child's special needs have you met with his/her key family supporters? > How do you sustain a two-way flow of information which empowers the family in their task of supporting and caring for a child with special needs? Are you enabling a proactive partnership which builds a team around the child?

Lads and Dads

Schools are not always comfortable places for men: they can be perceived as feminised places. At the RSA Academy in Tipton in the West Midlands, specific thought was given to male engagement strategies to try to increase the involvement of fathers in the education of their children. Once a term, on a Saturday morning, a 'Lads and Dads' event is offered (open to fathers and their sons/daughters). A specific focus around computers and science is offered, with a very practical orientation. Numbers attending may be small, but the quality of interaction is high and the fathers feel valued and involved. Breaking down the perceived barriers, tangible or invisible, is crucial to encouraging men, as fathers, to engage meaningfully in their children's education.

All of the building blocks shown in the table have to be set in a context of key principles:

- > Be honest with each other.
- > Be willing to learn from each other.
- > Treat each other with respect and dignity.
- > Be willing to admit you made mistakes.
- > Work collaboratively and co-operatively.
- > Be yourself.

Conclusion

Schools have the freedom to create a new approach to working with children and young people with SEN, one that is based on partnership with families. Children need families, just as they need education. By empowering each other we can empower our children, making them resilient individuals able to meet the challenges and opportunities of life in the 21st Century.

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> the rapidly emerging group of children and young people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities entering our school system, whether the source of that is disability, deprivation or disadvantage. This goal

also has to be set within the context of new figures showing a massive increase in the numbers of children with disabilities in the EU, which have risen from 700,000 to 950,000 since 2004 (a 36% increase).