

Parents as Partners

'Harder to Engage' Parents

Qualitative Research

Sherbert Research



**Research Report No
DCSF-RR111**

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Contents

Section		Page
1	Executive Summary	1
2	Project focus and approach	6
3	Introducing the segments and their needs	8
4	Parental Support for Learning	10
5	Complaints Systems in schools	19
6	Childcare	26
7	Appendix A: Recruitment Statements and Recruitment Criteria	40
	Appendix B: Pen Portraits	42

Please note: This is a qualitative research report, which represents findings from the opinions and experiences of research respondents in this sample only, carried out in September 2008. This report only addresses the questions asked by the moderators to the respondents during this research project covering the research objectives. It is not within the scope of this report to reference other documents, be they complementary qualitative research project reports, academic papers or policy documents.

This research project focused on 3 different DCSF policy areas, each of which has a separate chapter in this document. The policy areas are:

- Parental Support for Learning
- Complaints systems in schools
- Childcare

The parents in this research sample had been identified by the DCSF as 'harder to engage' as they seemed less likely than other parents get involved with their children's learning and development. The sample of parents was disaggregated into three segments*:

- Struggling Through (A3)
- Stepping Back (A6)
- Separate Lives (A7)

*These segments identified in a larger DCSF segmentation study

The research sample also included Grandparents who support with childcare and non resident fathers.

In this report the term 'parents' is used as a general term and refers to both mothers and fathers. Parents are distinguished as 'mothers / mums' or 'fathers / dads' when differences do occur between them. Furthermore, where differences have emerged between segments these have been pulled out and are specified; otherwise 'parents' refers to all parents in this research sample of harder to engage parents. Where possible, an indication of the scale of views has been provided (e.g. most, a few). However, due to the *qualitative* nature of the exercise, it is not possible to place further quantification on these views.

1. Executive Summary

The parents in these segments are identified ‘harder to engage’ but they are by no means disinterested in their children.

The respondents were recruited using attitude statements (See Appendix 1). This research focused on the experiences and opinions of parents in three segments whose attitudes and experiences fell under the title ‘harder to engage’. They were referred to as Struggling Through Parents (A3), Stepping Back Parents (A6), Separate Lives (A7). These segments had been previously identified as part of a wider DCSF Audience segmentation.

‘Harder to engage’ relates to parents’ overall attitudes to their children’s education, rather than their values and perception of their role as a parent. This target audience of parents prioritise their children’s wellbeing and happiness over academic achievement and worry about being able to support them emotionally, impart basic life skills and provide for them financially.

However, they lack confidence in the area of education, which can be attributed to their own experiences of school as a child, attitudes to school and authority figures. They also tend to work long hours and struggle with time and resources.

Interestingly, gender plays a role in determining these parents’ attitudes when supporting their children in learning, e.g. Mums tend to be the gatekeeper for schools and the main decision-maker for childcare and raising issues versus dads who tend to take on a secondary role and step in when issues become serious and Mum needs some extra support.

This research reveals that in order to effectively engage with these parents, it is important to affirm what they already do as parents and build on this. This approach may be more likely to empower them, by helping them to realise they are more knowledgeable and equipped than they perceive.

This research identifies key needs for each segment sample, the non resident parents and Grandparents. These are set out clearly and referred to in the different chapters referring to three different policy areas. They have been established to help guide future policies for this target audience.

Struggling Through Parents (A3) need to be *reassured* they are doing the right thing for their children, as they easily feel they are letting them down particularly as they are time poor. Therefore information requires an affirming and empowering tone, so parents feel able to join in with policy rather than excluded from it.

Stepping Back Parents (A6) need to feel *supported* in helping their children learn and develop, so that they feel they have made the appropriate decisions around their care and education and equipped their children with skills to be independent. These parents are open to learning and development themselves, but feel sensitive about the environment in which this is offered.

Separate Lives (A7) appear the most confident of parents in this sample. They need to feel *informed* about their children’s care and education but do not feel the need to be hands on. Any communication about their children and input required from them needs to feel effortless to encourage these parents to take part.

1.1 Policy areas in more detail

1.1.2 Parental Support for Learning

A range of factors influence the way parents in these segments engage with their children's learning

Many parents describe their own experiences of school in very negative terms and there is some resistance to having their children undergo similar discomfort and stress.

Most parents feel unable to support their children's learning beyond practical terms; especially as their academic capabilities are pushed to the limit once children reach secondary school. Each of the segments rationalises and compensates for any inadequacies in different ways.

Non resident parents express that they feel uninvolved and marginalised by schools as they claim to receive no information as this goes home with the child or is sent by post to the resident parent. Grandparents do not feel that it is their role to help with formal learning but prefer to support their grandchildren by teaching them general life skills.

Recommendations

Struggling Through Parents seek reassurance that they are doing the right thing; bringing up their children as best they can. They need a flexible approach for contacting schools, for example, outside working hours, face to face with teachers. These parents would also like simple, one page handouts or a link through the school's website where they can receive clear, concise and up-to-date information on their child's progress and attendance. Emails and SMS could work well as long as they are not overly intrusive. Communication from schools needs to have a welcoming, affirming and open tone of voice as these parents can feel sensitive and judged by more formal, authoritarian tones.

Stepping Back Parents would like an opportunity to gain insight into current teaching methods (at primary level), e.g. a 'how to help your children' handout booklet or practical session could facilitate this. Some are willing to go into schools for mini courses, although they may be anxious about appearing 'stupid' in front of other parents and so this approach would need careful handling. At secondary level they think a 'how to help your children' web page or booklet would be useful.

Separate Lives Parents are seeking effortless access of information. They would like an easy to read handout / website that they can access whenever they want; a regularly updated 'parent page' of the school website that displays current topics of focus and; a school calendar and homework diaries to keep them up to speed.

To engage **Dads** and **Non-Resident Parents** across all of the segments, a school linked website, that is easy to navigate and specific to their children would be appreciated, especially as Dads could use it in their own time and at their own pace. Whilst acknowledging the logistical difficulties, non-resident parents would like to be sent the same information as resident parents e.g. emails, letters, texts, so as to be kept informed of their child's education.

1.1.3 Complaints systems in schools

For the majority of parents in this sample, entering into the complaints process, unless the complaint is minor can be a nervous and uncomfortable experience. This includes both raising and receiving complaints.

For many parents in this sample, raising concerns and being available to respond to complaints is their way of demonstrating their support for their children's wellbeing in education. It is an important, accessible way for them to be involved, as academic support for their children is beyond their reach.

Parents' attitudes and ways of dealing with the problems their children experience at school vary according to the severity of the complaint. However, when an issue arises, the majority call for efficient, face to face contact with a teacher or member of the Senior Management Team.

Some parents feel that an effective complaints process can change their views of school. If they have come away feeling reassured and happy about the way the school has dealt with the issue, it can have a positive effect on how they engage with school in future, as perceptions change and any power distance seems reduced. By contrast, a frustrating and ineffective process, can negatively impact on parents' future engagement with schools. Improving communications and the complaints process with and from schools is an important vehicle for bringing parents on board.

Parents have little awareness of the complaints process. They tend to learn from experience and use instincts to guide them through the process rather than knowledge of any formal complaints or guidelines. Parents would appreciate knowing more about the process.

Recommendations

Parents in this sample would like a simple school handbook/supplement to be easily available to them and both in a paper copy and available online. This supplement would give them clear, easy to digest information on school policies and procedures and would outline the school's complaints procedures.

There is call for an open, balanced, flexible complaints process that is clear and comprehensible. Following initial contact with the teacher to inform them of issues (phone, face to face or email) parents would value a meeting arranged promptly with the class teacher and / or head teacher. They were unspecific and feel promptness of response depends on the severity of the complaint. To follow this they would also value a prompt written response about the outcome. Any information needs to be simple and straightforward without room for ambiguity.

An opportunity to utilise a mediator is welcomed for more serious complaints, though parents insist that they must have relevant qualifications and operate independently of the school, i.e. to not work at the school or within the Local Authority. The majority want them to be from a different organisation.

1.1.4 Childcare

Childcare emerges as a sensitive and engaging issue for most parents.

Within this sample of parents, particularly among Mums, there seems a sense of entitlement regarding *affordable*, high quality childcare. This includes early years childcare as well as before and after school childcare support for primary school and early secondary school aged children. Concepts of affordability and quality were not explored in detail with this sample of parents.

Mums and Dads in this sample seem to have distinct roles regarding childcare, with Mums, from all three segments seeming the more active and involved parent. Dads across the segments seem much less engaged emotionally about childcare and focus more on the financial and more logistical aspects of the process.

Almost all parents in this sample find researching childcare options a time-consuming and effortful process. Subsequently most rely on recommendations from other trusted parents / friends.

Many parents in this sample fit together packages of care for children aged under 5, using both informal childcare (care by grandparents primarily, though also by other family members, friends or neighbours) and formal childcare (in settings such as nurseries or playgroups).¹

These parents regard their children's grandparents as trusting, loving and cost effective carers for their children, and these things were mentioned as being very important when choosing packages of care for their children. Group settings are felt to be warm, involving and friendly, a place for children to develop socially and emotionally and where the emphasis is not on education, but on learning through play.

The perception of childminders among this sample of parents is that they are felt to be less trustworthy and loving than family and less involving and friendly than group settings. Only a minority of parents in this sample clearly placed the value of the one to one attention that a childminder offered above these considerations.

Childcare options for primary school age children seem more limited, yet childcare for this age group continues to be necessary for many parents in this sample. Parents say they try to make use of breakfast and after-school clubs at their child's school, as well as relying on friends and family (usually grandparents), but this can become burdensome if there are only a few people to call upon.

Once children reach secondary school, arranging childcare becomes gradually less stressful for parents as children are travelling to and from school independently and have mobile phones that afford them more independence.

Grandparents in this sample were all recruited to be responsible for the care of at least one of their grandchildren on a regular basis. Many of the grandparents feel that when this responsibility extends to regular care and school runs 2-3 times a week or more it can begin to feel more like a labour of love than a pleasurable and enjoyable experience.

¹ Parents in this sample often used the term 'private nurseries' or 'nurseries' to refer to group childcare settings for under 5s for which they pay / paid

Non-resident parents spoken to in this sample, a limited number, express that they can feel left out of the childcare equation altogether. The resident parent tends to make all the childcare decisions and non resident parents are often either unaware of any issues or can feel less empowered to act upon them.

Recommendations

Parents in this sample need information that reassures, supports and informs them. This information needs to demonstrate an understanding of the emotional and practical challenges facing parents, and offer them solutions that meet their own particular needs.

Ideally, Mums in particular would like to locate all the relevant information at one source - both information pertaining to childcare provision and financial support.

Parents in this sample would like information about childcare provision and support across the different ages, to be provided by an easy to use, credible childcare resource. Many suggest they would like to be able to find information on one trustworthy website that offers the scope for a message board to share concerns and gain advice from respected professionals as well as other parents.

A credible and easy to use resource seems most essential to parents when their children are in the early years, because this is when childcare issues can be most complex. However the parents felt as though such a resource would remain helpful as children develop through primary school and into early secondary school, because it is only once children reach upper secondary and become more self sufficient so they stop requiring some form of care, even if it is through sports and other activities.

Parents in the sample would also like their child's school to offer breakfast/after school club places to all children, not cap it at a small number. Many also expressed the need for breakfast/after school clubs to be free or heavily subsidised, saying they can find this type of childcare expensive, especially if they have more than one child. Harder to engage parents in this sample recognise the social value that breakfast/afterschool clubs bring to their children, but many end up forgoing this in favour of informal care if costs are too high or they do not receive a place as clubs are oversubscribed.

More specifically, **Struggling Through Parents** need reassurance that any paid for childcare would offer value for money and be in the best interests of their child and any emotional benefits need to be highlighted to them. **Stepping Back Parents** would love clearer information on different childcare options. They would also like advice on what they can do at home and seem receptive to the message of 'learning through play'. And they want to feel supported when making enquiries, not judged. **Separate Lives Parents** would like clear information about childcare provision and tax credits, so they feel able to go back to work.

2. Project Focus and Approach

2.1 Research objectives

The overall mission of this research was to understand how the DCSF can best encourage those parents who seem less likely to engage with their children's learning and development, to become more involved. The DCSF had previously carried out attitudinal segmentation work, to help to understand which groups of parents are less likely to engage. For research purposes, these parents were identified as:

- Struggling Through (A3)
- Stepping Back (A6)
- Separate Lives (A7)

The research sample also included Grandparents who regularly care for one or more grandchildren and non resident parents. We used separate criteria to recruit these respondents.

This research has sought to identify any overarching/common themes across the segments and audiences focusing on the following 3 policy areas:

- Parental Support for Learning
- Childcare
- Complaints systems in schools

More specifically:

Parental Support for Learning:

- Uncovering motivations and barriers, particularly attitudinal, towards parents' involvement in their children's learning, including exploring the role of different support mechanism such as personal tutors and new technologies
- Identifying tangible ways on how to overcome obstacles to involvement and parental confidence

Childcare

- Exploring parents' experiences and use of childcare, formal and informal, including understanding the trade-offs that are made around childcare arrangements
- Identifying a clear set of needs and priorities for parents in terms of how childcare services could be improved

Complaints Systems in Schools

- Exploring parents' awareness and experiences of current complaints processes
- Establishing how to enhance the system to specifically meet parents' needs

2.2 Research sample and methodology

Fifteen, one and a half hour, mini groups with parents and grandparents

Four, one and a half hour, depths with non-resident parents

Six, one hour, in home, ethnographic observations

Specifically:

- Six mini groups with dads who have kids aged 0 to 19 (all to be resident dads)
- One with 'Struggling through' dads of pre-school and primary aged kids only (0 to 10s)
- One with 'Stepping back' dads of pre-school and primary aged kids only (0 to 10s)
- One with 'Separate lives' dads of pre-school and primary aged kids only (0 to 10s)
- One with 'Struggling through' dads of secondary school and post 16 kids (11 to 19s)
- One with 'Stepping back' dads of secondary school and post 16 kids (11 to 19s)
- One with 'Separate lives' dads of secondary school and post 16 kids (11 to 19s)

Six mini groups with mums who have kids aged 0 to 19 (all to be resident mums)

- One with 'Struggling through' mums of pre-school and primary aged kids only (0 to 10s)
- One with 'Stepping back' mums of pre-school and primary aged kids only (0 to 10s)
- One with 'Separate lives' mums of pre-school and primary aged kids only (0 to 10s)
- One with 'Struggling through' mums of secondary school and post 16 kids (11 to 19s)
- One with 'Stepping back' mums of secondary school and post 16 kids (11 to 19s)
- One with 'Separate lives' mums of secondary school and post 16 kids (11 to 19s)

Three mini groups with grandparents who have grandchildren aged 0 to 16s

- One with Grandmas who help to care for grandchildren aged 0 to 7
- One with Grandmas who help to care for grandchildren aged 8 to 16
- One with Grandpas who help to care for grandchildren aged 0 to 16

2.3 Dates and locations

Research was carried out from September 8 to September 26 2008 in St Albans, Liverpool, Brighton and Hove, Haringey (N. London), Newcastle, Nottingham, Croydon and Hertfordshire

3. Introducing the segments and their needs

This section provides a series of 'pen portraits' to introduce the reader to the type of respondents in the sample. They have been crafted in order to bring the different segments to life. More detailed pen portraits are available in Appendix Two at the back of this document.

Across the segments, some key findings emerge. They offer clear ways forward for policy for this 'harder to engage' group of parents.

Respondents' attitudes to education and parenting largely reflect the statements outlined in the recruitment process. However, there are also many areas where segments share common views and experiences e.g. their own experiences of school as a child, attitudes to school and the authority figures.

Interestingly, gender appears to play a role in determining parents' attitudes to supporting their children in learning e.g. Mums' tendency to be the gatekeeper for communication with schools and the main decision-maker for childcare vs. dads taking a secondary role.

3.1 Struggling Through Parents

Tina, 32 (and Andy, 34)

"I look after our two children aged eight and six. I'm not with their father so he doesn't really get too involved in the day to day school matters. When we were together, he used to say it was my job to look after them anyway as I had more time and patience. Childcare is far too expensive, so I don't work and I'm on benefits. As soon as the children are old enough, I want to get back to work. I used to work in a beauty salon, so I'll do that again, and I want to get a college qualification too. I'm not sure how I can help my children with their homework as I'm not clever enough with the maths and when they see their father, he complains that it was hard enough when he was at school, and that it's all changed now how they do the sums."

Core need: *Reassurance* that they're doing the right thing for their children.

3.2 Stepping Back Parents

Linda, (and Paul), 43 & 48

"We live in London with our two teenage daughters and eleven year old son. We have an incredibly busy life and my husband was never in a position to take time out of his career as this would have affected his position. My husband always used to say that the Government should give Mums a proper incentive because it really is one of the most important jobs ever! I brought up the children, but now they're older, I work full time and my mother helps with the youngest. I think it's best to leave the children to get on with it on their own now. To be honest, I think we've already helped them too much and sometimes we end up arguing which makes me think we shouldn't help them at all. What they do now is a little too out of our league. We help them in other ways. I'm always there to listen if they have a problem. For example, we bought them all a memory stick so they can transfer work from home to school".

Core need: *Support* in helping their children learn

3.3 Separate Lives Parents

Jane, 33 (and Gary, 42)

"I live with my partner on a small farm with our three kids in the outer suburbs of London. The farm produces hay which my husband is responsible for, and I look after the horses, and also, our seven year old son. I also have two teenage daughters. I fell pregnant at 16 and felt a bit left behind as everyone else was getting on, 'having a life' and I was stuck at home. My girls are both relatively happy at school. My husband and I used the Internet to seek advice on what we should be doing. He admits that he's lazy when it comes to helping our youngest with his homework, but we pay for additional tuition outside of school. I am happy with whatever they all want to do as long as they are happy and I've said that I won't pressurise them. They seem to cope well and that they don't ask for me or their dad for much help anyway"

Core need: To feel *informed* about their children's care and education

3.4 Non Resident Parents (only 4 consulted in this project)

Eric, 44

"I'm divorced with 2 kids who are both at secondary school my son is 16 and my daughter's 14. We were all living in Brighton & Hove until their mum met a new fellow and moved down the coast to Southampton. It's not the same. What I found most hard was the radio silence from the schools. I lost all contact with how the kids were getting on and my ex-wife didn't keep me informed. I wasn't even told by the school when she was taken home sick one day. I know a lot of separated couples feel left out like I do. Even if they don't live with their kids they're still interested. We're still their parent after all!

Core needs: *Information and inclusion*, like resident parents

3.5 Grandparents

Cecilia, 64 (and George, 71)

"I retired a few years ago. My husband and I spend two days a week now as glorified babysitters for our two Grandsons aged 6 and 9. When we're not supporting them physically and mentally, we're propping them up financially. I don't know how my children's generation are supposed to manage without their parents these days. Childcare is too expensive and they don't really want strangers looking after the children, but they still need to be picked up and looked after, so we do it. During the school holidays we also have them for full days, which we're glad we can still do but for how much longer I'm not sure. Second time round it's lovely but harder work and more responsibility as they're not yours. My husband and I see it as a labour of love! We help them learn about life rather than with education. We give them the wisdom of our years, patience and understanding"

Core need: To know they are supporting their children through looking after their Grandchildren. But they need a break

4. Parental Support for learning

4.1 Objectives

- To uncover motivations and barriers, particularly attitudinal, towards parents' involvement in their children's learning, including exploring the role of different support mechanisms
- To identify tangible ways on how to overcome obstacles to involvement and parental confidence.

4.2 Introduction

A range of factors influence the way parents in these segments engage with their children's learning

Many parents describe their own experiences of school in very negative terms and there's some resistance to having their children undergo similar discomfort and stress.

Some parents attest to being actively involved in their own children's learning and development on some level.

Most parents feel unable to support their children's learning beyond practical terms such as buying them a computer, getting them ready in the mornings for school, making sure they get to the bus stop on time; especially as their academic capabilities are pushed to the limit once children reach secondary school. Each of the segments rationalises and compensates for any inadequacies in different ways.

Grandparents do not feel that it is their role to help with formal learning, want grandchildren to be supported generally with life issues.

4.3 School- their own experiences

In this sample, Parents' experiences and recollection of schooling are generally negative, and sometimes these associations are passed on to their children. Often they recall struggling with learning and enjoying the social life, as well as strict discipline and pressure.

*"I was told I didn't apply myself - and I didn't have the support, so I didn't achieve"
(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)"*

*"I have no fond memories of the school, but I enjoyed time with friends"
(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton)"*

*"I was a scallywag, signed my name on the day of exams but didn't sit them, just didn't want to get fined!"
(Dad, Struggling Through, Liverpool)"*

*"I lost my way a bit at secondary school when girls came on the scene"
(Dad, Separate Lives, Nottingham)"*

*"I didn't fit in. It took me a long time to get out of my shell"
(Mum, Stepping Back, London)"*

Very few recall any support extended to them by their own parents and therefore believe that any input they do give their children feels more than they received.

"I just remember my mum being there when I got home, she'd ask if I had homework and that was it"

(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

"As a child, my parents didn't get involved with learning. They just left me to get on with it. I don't remember a reading book getting sent home. I used to say 'I got stuck with maths or something and no-one would help. It wasn't that they didn't want to; it's just that they didn't know'"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

4.4 Perception of role in children's learning

Parents in this sample believe their role is to encourage a 'rounded' education. They want their children to enjoy school as a social as well as learning experience. They prioritise their children's emotional wellbeing, safety and creative play over pure study. They perceive that their responsibility is to teach children about life skills, which they see as fundamental to their success.

Subsequently, they resist placing children under too much pressure to succeed academically - they are opposed to excessive homework, testing and streaming policies. They feel proud of this attitude, their role and want to pass on these values to their children.

"I try to teach them life skills. To me, there's two sides. School is like have you got the ability to be told something and learn it so it sticks in your head. But there's more than that for people to learn, you know when you get out of school, you've gotta be street wise, you've gotta be clued up"

(Dad, Separate Lives, Nottingham)

"I think there's more pressure on kids now, I'm always telling them just do your best and that's all you can do. I don't care whether they get low grades as long as they try their best, that's my stance on it. I'm reluctant to put pressure on my kids like that, but the schools, well my local, it's very driven, always doing' SATS and that. I disagree with that"

(Dad, Struggling Through, Liverpool)

Their perceptions are largely borne out of own experiences at school and the values instilled in them by their parents. Many also base their opinions on knowledge and experience of peers who may have better qualifications but are 'worse off' financially and personally. Undoubtedly, parents in this sample feel they DO support their children's learning in a number of ways. They recognise that the nature of this support changes as children move through school, with much less academic support being offered in the latter years when it's more about giving emotional support. There is some evidence to suggest that by secondary years, parents feel the responsibility lies with schools to support learning.

4.5 How age of child impacts on parental involvement:

Children aged 0 to 5

Involvement at this age seems characterised by fun and creativity, with parents in this sample helping children explore the world around them.

Parents in this sample get involved in a variety of ways, including reading stories, doing arts & crafts activities, helping children to count, taking and accompanying children to some extra-curricular activities (e.g. sports, music, drama), as well as to and from school. At least one parent tries to attend 'group setting' parent-teacher evenings when they can.

At this stage in their child's development parents appear to have higher confidence. In general they find supporting learning is a pleasurable experience, as learning is fun, often through play and games. However, some parents are uncertain about how much help they should offer, they want to feel included, informed and involved in their child's learning / development.

"I think they should taught the parents how to do the phonics, cause there's all actions that go with them"

(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)

"I play games with them, they're still learning, playing board games is part of their learning when they're little. As they get older it gets more serious, more targets"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

"When we go to ASDA I get my son to read out the letters of the shop to me".

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

Middle / Upper Primary School

School is characterised by parents in this sample feeling pressured to offer sound advice. They feel the need to get it right. They are involved in the day to day logistics such as getting their children ready in the mornings, transporting them to and from an increasing number of extra-curricular activities and most want these activities after school to focus on fun and physical exercise. Parents also refer to talking to their children about their day (if children are co-operative) and supervising homework. They are not likely to be helping children to complete their homework - although some admit to the odd bit of cutting and colouring - but rather see their role as making sure it is done. If problems with homework are encountered, some may seek advice from teaching staff, but many may tell their children to leave it and / or ask a teacher in the morning rather than being stressed.

Most parents attend the Parent-teacher evenings, although wife/mother may often attend on her own, as Dad is busy working and / or believes the presence of one parent is adequate.

"My wife ends up doing it (going to parents evening) all anyway. It's not my role so much"

(Dad, Struggling Through, Liverpool)

"They come home with homework and I'll just be like, leave it, don't do it, because I don't like this pressure for all the homework for basically what I see as to you know get them higher up the 'SATs' league. It's all back to the Government there isn't it, putting these pressures on the school. That's the way I see it, you know"

(Dad, Struggling Through, Liverpool)

By this stage in their children's education, many of the parents in this sample express frustration in their lack of familiarity with school's teaching methods (e.g. maths and reading). This feeling can confuse and may alienate parents from offering further support.

Parents in this sample begin to worry that children are being pressured to get good grades, which often goes against their values for their children's overall development and well being. Added to this, some parents are beginning to feel redundant at this stage of their children's education, as they are unable to draw on their own knowledge.

"The work they do in the school. It absolutely baffles me"
(Mum, *Struggling Through*, Newcastle)

"They would sooner have their mother do it than me. Even if I tried. I haven't impressed them yet, I don't think there's anything I could do to change this"
(Dad, *Separate Lives*, Nottingham)

Secondary School

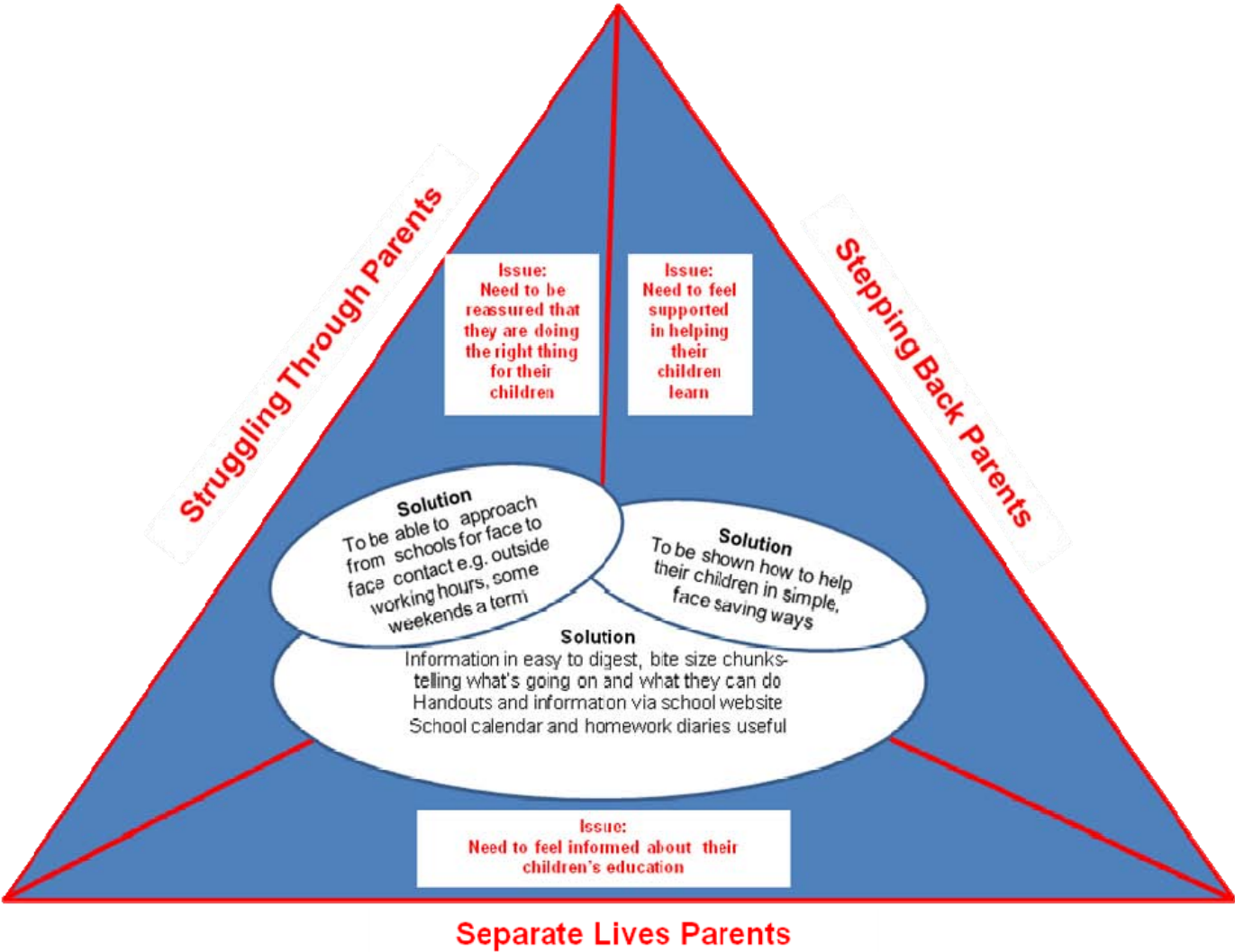
School is characterised by parents in this sample finding their limits as their children's knowledge begins to exceed their own. Parents can feel redundant by this stage in their children's academic career. At worst they can feel stupid and unhelpful, they may not regard themselves as clever and they do not want to look foolish in front of their children or have arguments, as this increases stress in the household. Many parents in this sample are also unsure about how much help to give their children. Some believe that school work is not their problem and it is the role of the school to manage their difficulties.

They tend to provide financial support (books, a computer and funding for school trips) and emotional support, which seems more passive than active, i.e. 'just being there' to listen and offer opinion, stepping in when absolutely necessary. Parents also attend parents' evenings and other important meetings (options, transitions).

"The only thing I feel I could do was buy them a computer and make sure they used it for school, not just for MSN"
(Mum, *Stepping Back*, London)

"It's not all about the grades, you just want a happy, well balanced child"
(Mum, *Struggling Through*, Brighton and Hove)

Figure 1: Issues and solutions diagram by segment



4.6 By Segment and audience

Struggling Through Parents

These parents need to be *reassured* that they are doing the right thing for their children.

Struggling Through parents seem to be incredibly busy, trying to hold down jobs to try to make ends meet. The ripple effects of this strained lifestyle can be felt through the family as their demanding work commitments mean that they have little time to offer their children.

A majority of these parents harbour negative experiences from their history of schooling and many had not continued into further education. These experiences impact on their confidence and ability to successfully engage with their children's education. Furthermore, they feel anxious and guilty when unable to provide sufficient support. Their anxiety is further compounded by their limited ability to attend school for informal updates from teachers about their children's progress because of time constraints and work related pressures. What is apparent is that too much information can overwhelm this segment of parents, and they rely on childcare providers to support their children with their learning. However, this approach can feel unstructured and inconsistent and exacerbates a feeling of frustration.

A flexible approach is needed from schools to engage with Struggling Through parents, and one that accommodates their work commitments; for example, opportunities for them to engage with schools outside of working hours or at certain weekends throughout the year. They also need information presented to them in easy to digest, bite-size chunks, informing them of 'what is going on' and 'what they can do'.

*"I've got three kids, and if they all have homework every night or even twice a week, it's impossible. I can't help them all."
(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)*

Stepping Back Parents

These parents need to feel *supported* in helping their children to learn

The initial confidence these parents feel when supporting their children in early years and primary education fades in later years and is replaced by anxiety when trying to engage with formal aspects of learning. Although they continue to try to support, pressure is added to their dwindling confidence of secondary education (with the academic levels making them feel out of their depth), whilst many also try to juggle childcare needs. They feel out of touch with the school and at a loss as to know what they can best do to assist their children. Some do not know *how* much to help, often feeling that the type of support they can offer at home could be *too* much, and that this is an overcompensation for not being as involved as they'd like to be in school matters.

Stepping Back parents would like to be more involved as long as they feel that they are contributing to their children's learning in a meaningful way. They may use the Internet as a reference for support, and as a confident source of information. They also seek advice from friends and their partner as to what they can do to support learning.

Stepping Back parents want an opportunity to be shown *how* to help. Some of them are willing to go into schools for mini courses, though they are anxious about appearing 'stupid' in front of other parents, so any approach will need careful handling.

*"I didn't think they were getting enough homework, so told the school, but I didn't get any feedback. If you don't hear back, you stop bothering."
(Dad, Stepping Back, Newcastle)*

Separate Lives Parents

These parents need to feel *informed* about their children's childcare and education

Stepping Back parents may seem less likely to harbour confidence issues as they are relatively motivated and goal driven; their aspirations however, are independent of their child's needs. They do feel able to approach teachers with questions, and to assist their children with some simple homework. Though the main type of support offered to their children is emotional and financial and many do not think it is up to them to get too involved in learning. They are keen to offer their opinion if their children experience difficulties, such as making choices about future subject options at school, though this is usually as far as the support goes and further practical assistance is rarely discussed. Dads within the segment rely almost entirely on Mums to support their children's education and to manage school issues.

Handouts and information via the school website would be well received by these parents. They would be interested in information relevant to their children's current work. They also find the school calendar and homework diaries are a great way of keeping them abreast of developments.

*"It would help if they put a leaflet through the door or put something on the internet"
(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool, Newcastle)*

Dads

Dads need to engage in a way that does not compromise their confidence or status

Across all of the segments, Dads seem to expect Mums to take on more responsibility in the area of learning and support. Dads' own experiences of school are sometimes negative and many seem to feel quite uncomfortable in a school environment. They are also embarrassed about being shown up in front of children - of looking stupid and not being able to help. Dads also expressed, most vocally, that their children should not be put under pressure. They want to feel that their children are not stressed or overworked.

Dads are less likely to go into school for parents evening or to meet with teachers as they don't tend to see this as their role. They expect their partners to keep them informed of issues that arise which are of a serious nature. Many Dads would respond well if there was a greater choice of options available to them for keeping abreast of their children's learning.

Dads suggested that they would like access to an easy to navigate school website, where they could easily find information out about their children's progress, subjects they are learning and communicate with teachers as necessary. They imagined that they would use this in their own time.

*"I'd say I give them moral support, that's all. I can't give them nothing more than that. I can just tell them, you've gotta do well in life. Look at your poor Dad, you know, just a taxi driver."
(Dad, Struggling Through, Liverpool)*

Non Resident Parents*

**Whilst findings were consistent across this segment, the sample size for this segment was very small. Further consultation is recommended.*

As with resident parents, this segment wanted to feel informed and included.

Non resident parents report feeling uninvolved and marginalised by schools as they claim any information goes home with the child or is sent by post to the resident parent. This appears to be the case regardless of whether splits between couples are acrimonious. This means they do not know about the day to day goings on in school, from plays to outings and rely heavily on ex-partners to inform and invite them to events. The majority would like to attend parents' evenings at their child's school, but in practice only do if their ex-partner informs them that one is on.

Some parents in this sample expressed disappointment and sadness because they would like to be more involved in their children's learning, and see school as a big part of their children's day to day life. They want schools to recognise their role as parents despite not living with their children. Some say they have been into the school office and asked to be included but this has not yet been put into action. Whilst they do seem to recognise that it is more work for the schools to send out more emails, letters, texts they feel it is important and

should be a matter of form. For example, the non-resident mum feels very strongly about being asked for her consent for children to go on trips and being told if her child is sick and thinks it's vital that the school keeps her abreast of these things.

*"My daughter was sent home sick and the school didn't bother to tell me. I found out later when I phoned my kids. I felt awful. The school keeps doing that, I'm their mum."
(Non Resident Mum)*

Grandparents

Grandparents need to know they are supporting their children and do so by looking after their grandchildren; however, they need a break!

The majority of Grandparents within the sample look after their grandchildren regularly as a way to support their children. However, they do not feel that it is their role to help with formal learning and they prefer to support their grandchildren with more general 'life issues'. Grandparents feel that learning and teaching in the 21st century school environment is so vastly different to their experiences as children, and they feel that today, children are under much more pressure.

Grandparents respond to the needs of their children by providing stability, guidance, encouragement and financial support for their grandchildren. Unlike other segments within the sample, Grandparents have positive associations with their education as children and they foster a love of school and respect for their teachers. They sometimes help their grandchildren, where they can, with literacy and numeracy homework, (albeit, the 'old fashioned way').

*"I love my granddaughter, but that's not my role. I got the Internet here so she could play and do school work, but I don't help. I encourage."
(Grandfather, Brighton & Hove)*

*"We're fighting Alzheimer's what do we want to know about new methods of teaching for! We just look after them, glorified babysitters!"
(Grandfather, Brighton & Hove)*

4.7 Summary

Struggling Through Parents seek *reassurance* they are doing the right thing. They need:

- A flexible approach for contacting schools e.g. outside working hours, face to face
- Simple 1 page handouts or a link through the school's website where they can receive clear, concise and up-to-date information on child's progress and attendance
- Emails and SMS could work well as long as they're not overly intrusive
- A welcoming, affirming and open tone of voice in all communications

Stepping Back Parents seek *basic skills training* to feel *supported*. They need:

- An opportunity to gain insight into current teaching methods (at primary level) e.g. a 'how to help your children' handout booklet or practical session

Separate Lives Parents seek *effortless information*. They need:

- An easy to read handout / website idea that they can access whenever they want
- A regularly updated 'parent page' of the school website that displays current topics of focus
- School calendar and homework diaries to keep them up to speed

Strategies for Inclusion

Ideal strategies for harder to engage parents need to support them in their needs for reassurance, information, guidance and interest. It is important that information can be accessed easily, as harder to engage parents are less likely than some other parents to chase up information, and also many have less time to do so. Popular ideas from the sample group are for a parents' area of the school website that keeps them up to date about school life relevant to their children. Parents may also respond well to emails and / or SMS texts, information handouts and a copy of the school calendar. Homework diaries are also considered a good way to maintain consistent contact between parents and their child's school.

Other ideas included a greater availability of teachers for one-off meetings, informal parent / child days at school and access to parent support advisors. These strategies would support the needs of parents to feel reassured and included and may maintain their interest. Sessions or courses for parents in school and / or one to one tutors would also support the need for parents to feel reassured and included, however, this is likely to be too time-consuming for most harder to engage parents to get involved.

5. Complaints Systems in Schools

5.1 Research objectives

- To explore parents' awareness and experiences of current complaints processes
- To establish how to enhance the system to specifically meet parents' needs

5.2 Introduction

For parents in this research sample, raising concerns is outside most parents' comfort zone.

For the majority, entering into the complaints process, unless the complaint is minor, can be a nervous and uncomfortable experience. However, for many parents in this sample raising concerns and being available to complain is their way of demonstrating their support for their children's wellbeing in education, and an important, accessible way for them to be involved as academic support is beyond their reach.

Parents' attitudes and ways of dealing with the problems their children experience at school vary according to the severity of the complaint. However, when an issue arises they all want efficient, face to face contact with a teacher or member of the Senior Management Team.

Some parents in this sample feel that an effective complaints process can change their views of school. If they come away feeling reassured and happy about the way the school has dealt with the issue, it can have a positive effect on how they engage with school in future.

However, a frustrating and ineffective process, can negatively impact on parents' future engagement with schools. Improving the communications and complaints process with and from schools is an important vehicle for bringing parents on board. Most in this sample feel this may be achieved if the schools are open and responsive to parental concerns, which some schools, parents in this sample feel are not.

Parents in this sample have little awareness of the complaints process. They tend to learn from experience and use instincts to guide them through the process rather than knowledge of any formal procedure or guidelines. Parents would appreciate knowing about the process, and suggest a simple school handbook / supplement to be made easily available to them, via a note in their children's school book bags, at the beginning of each school year, or sent in the post to parents in a paper copy and available online. This supplement would give them clear, easy to digest information on school policies and procedures and would outline the school's complaints procedures.

"I've been called into the school twice because my girls were wearing the wrong uniform, but received an email about behaviour. Surely it should be the other way around? I don't get their (the schools) priorities and ways of dealing with things"
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, St. Albans)

5.3 Feelings about complaints

Mums respond to the complaints procedure somewhat differently to Dads - which seems to suggest that gender also plays an important role in influencing behaviour / engagement with the complaints process.

*“The father takes a different approach to the woman at school. The wife wants to do it. They’re more tactile”
(Dad, Struggling Through, Liverpool)*

For all, complaining to a school can be a difficult process and one that does not come naturally.

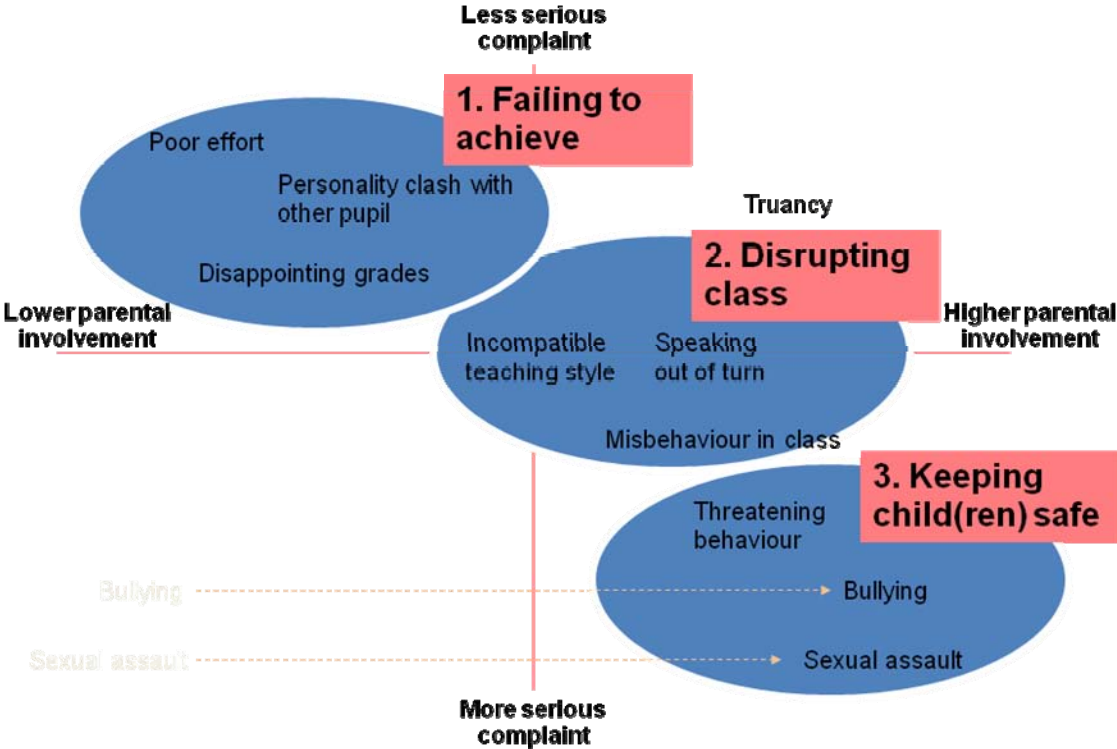
*“I hate that when you want to speak to the school you have to ask for a formal appointment so in the end unless it is really important you just don’t do it”
(Mum, Separate Lives, St. Albans)*

There are number of common themes exhibited by all parents in the sample:

- Problem avoidance (a short term issue they hope will go away)
- Low level of confidence
- Feeling of inadequacy and incompetence in presence of authority figures
- Fear of humiliation
- Fear that the issue won’t be resolved
- Fear that their children may suffer repercussions
- Feeling sensitive

The efficacy of the complaints process is largely determined by the severity of the problem and the level of parental involvement as shown in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2: Mapping of complaints



5.4. Concerns around failing to achieve: less serious complaint, lower parental involvement

Parents seem to feel that problems relating to underachievement are more minor than other problems, such as bullying, and these can be overlooked for some time. Time taken to address this kind of problem can be exacerbated by high stress levels at home and poor communication between the child and parents.

Added to which many of these parents are not in the habit of talking to teachers or keeping abreast of things at school, particularly as children move through Primary and into Secondary, so they will not necessarily pick up on the problem. ‘Separate Lives’ and ‘Stepping Back’ and parents are not necessarily recognising the warning signs, with ‘Stepping Back’ parents in particular feeling uncertain how to resolve the issue for the child, especially if they are at secondary school. ‘Struggling Through’ parents are not around as much so have little relationship with the school and may not know what is going on.

Children can also be barriers. School pupils may also be unresponsive or unwilling to share the issues with their parents. Some parents reported that things can deteriorate from being a minor issue that does not get picked up on, to becoming a problem with knock on effects, creating other issues for the child at school such as a loss of confidence, bad behaviour, and truancy.

Correcting problems with achievement

This research found that if there are concerns about a child's academic achievement, parents and teachers are equally likely to approach the other. Often these concerns are quickly cleared when parents go into schools and meet the teachers to discuss. In these instances most parents in the sample find the school to be approachable and reasonable and were subsequently encouraged by their experience.

The majority of parents in this sample feel going into Primary schools is easier than going into Secondary schools. The environment and teachers feel more approachable and less intimidating, and as their children have one teacher for everything, they have a consistent point of contact. Furthermore, the majority of the parents in this sample have fond memories of their own primary school experience. In contrast, Parents in this sample feel that Secondary schools are less open and approachable and they do not seem to know the teachers. Often these emotions are further compounded by their own more negative Secondary school experience and the larger physical size of the school itself.

Only a minority of parents knew that schools are required by Ofsted to be approachable.

It was noted that when the complaints experience about achievement is effective, it can change parents' perceptions of the school for the better, especially if parents are engaging with Secondary schools, which can have a positive effect for how they engage with the school in the future.

"It was easy to complain when they were at nursery, as we were paying. Now it's harder, the secretary never puts you through, they don't want you talking at the beginning or end of the day, so when can we talk to teachers if we really need to? It does put me off"
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, Liverpool)

5.5 Disrupting class: Higher parental involvement, serious complaint

Disruptions to the class do not escape teachers' notice and they invariably contact the parents when the child's behaviour consistently interferes with activities of other students. Typically parents are called to a meeting. Alternatively, parents may learn of the disturbance from their child or other parents.

"It's very hard to get appointments with the teacher. The only time you can get an appointment with them is if they bring a letter home saying your kid's been disruptive."
(Dad, *Struggling Through*, Liverpool)

These issues can be more sensitive, as they involve the different personalities of the students and teachers and their teaching styles and are often personal in nature. Parents report that it is often more difficult to broach these issues with teachers and feel more reluctant to become involved. The stress of the issue can be barrier to successful resolution of the problem.

Despite having identified the problem, some parents especially Mums across all segments in this sample may feel unwilling to confront the school. Often they are time poor so either push problem to one side or deny that the problem exists, believing that the school is best placed to handle it. These less confident parents also fear that they are not equipped to deal with the issue and risk making things worse for their child or wasting the teachers' time. Some Mums need to be empowered to know they can support their child with problems and make complaints, perhaps by the school itself fostering more consistent dialogue with parents.

Dads, particularly those 'Struggling Through' and 'Stepping Back' do not see it as their role to make a complaint. Their responsibilities are more centred on working and supporting their family. As with 'Separate Lives' Dads they also harbour negative associations towards school and feel uncomfortable returning to this environment, particularly on a sensitive issue. Dads in this sample may benefit from knowing there are systems and procedures in place around complaints, to give them confidence to share their views. With harder to engage Dads this may be best introduced at the start of their child's school career.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do, so I leave it to my wife, but it would be good to know we had a leg to stand on"

(Dad, Struggling Through, London)

Correcting disruptive class behaviour

Many parents in this sample recall a few instances when problems around behaviour only became apparent when the situation reaches a critical stage, for example when the child appears stressed and upset or the parents receive repeated messages from the teacher and/or the school.

"The only time you get an appointment with them is if they bring a letter home saying your kid's been disruptive"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

"I had a letter home saying that Steve didn't have his pencil sharpener. What a waste of paper, a waste of staff"

(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton and Hove)

Parents in this sample may be caught off guard, surprised that there is a problem especially if they are not around very much. Dads in particular, may struggle to take time off to address issues directly with school and may come to the process 'cold' and ill prepared. Many do not feel equipped with the language or skills necessary to deal with the teachers and school (and some find it hard to deal with their children in private at home). 'Separate Lives' dads in particular admitted to overreacting and regretting it, to relieve their guilt.

"I've never had to complain to the school but one teacher was very offhand about my son's behaviour in a Parent-Teacher meeting and I walked away, it was too upsetting, I couldn't talk to the bloke"

(Dad, Separate Lives, Nottingham)

Communication between the school and parent may even break down. This means that constructive advice may be ignored by parents unless intervention can be carried out at an earlier stage.

5.6 Keeping child(ren) safe: Very high parental involvement, very serious complaint

Problems of this nature, like threatening behaviour, bullying, or at worst sexual assault, left without any intervention from parents or school, can spiral out of control. These issues may be stressful, highly personal issues that children are less easily able to share.

"We were unaware that our daughter was being bullied, until it got really serious and we went to school"
(Mum, Stepping Back, London)

However, once problems come to light, parents from this sample typically respond in very emotional ways, as this is how they feel they can best demonstrate their support for their children's well being in education. However, because the issues are often more serious, parents report that they sometimes fail to keep their emotions in check. Some say they can become aggressive, angry or highly defensive of their child, particularly 'Separate Lives' Dads who may only intervene at the eleventh hour. Any emotional outbursts with the teacher are generally regretted, but such behaviour reflects parents' disconnection with the school and its complaints procedure. In such instances, parents imagine that the child usually suffers (especially if in secondary school) as he / she can be embarrassed over the emotionally charged confrontation as they may fear that their parents have made things worse.

Dealing with serious complaints

If parents from this sample do enter a complaints process, they can feel disappointed about how the complaint is handled and unsure about how to proceed. They can feel annoyed with themselves for failing to put the point across clearly. Teachers are perceived as being dismissive and/or defensive and accused of failing to act. However, parents who feel dissatisfied with the outcome struggle to know how to appeal.

"I went to the head a few times. Nothing changed, he's useless. What do I do now?"
(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

"We phoned up first and we spoke to the year head. We said we want this sorted. They said they'd get back to us, but they didn't"
(Dad, Stepping Back, Newcastle)

More problems can be encountered when dealing with secondary schools. Often parents' low confidence in their own academic ability can magnify feelings of isolation that they may feel from the wider school community.

"You feel like you're not part of it. Basically, you're not really allowed into the school at all. I don't know what the kids are doing".
(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

"When you go to see them, it feels like you're having a battle with them sometimes",
(Dad, Struggling Through, Liverpool)

Parents in this sample remark how they dislike receiving written complaints from schools, as the tone feels authoritarian and many feel ill-equipped to resolve the issue.

Parents reported appreciating the human contact, anything purportedly authoritarian can reinforce their feelings of powerlessness and resentment toward the school system, creating further barriers against engaging them.

5.7 Strategies for improving the complaints process

Parents in this research sample are easily able to suggest ways to improve the complaints process in primary and secondary schools.

Parents would like to receive a simple, school handbook and online supplement that raises awareness about complaints procedures.

There was a call for an open, balanced, flexible process that is clear and comprehensible:

- Following the initial phone contact with the teacher to inform them of the issue, they would like a meeting to be arranged promptly with the teacher and or Head Teacher.

*“In our day, it was always face to face, you always saw the head teacher of the teacher. It doesn’t happen like that now”
(Dad, Stepping Back, St. Albans)*

- They would like prompt written feedback following any complaint / verbal meeting

Any information needs to be simple and straight forward without room for ambiguity. This will help parents feel reassured that they have been taken seriously and that the process has been fair.

The opportunity to use a mediator is welcomed for more serious complaints, but parents would like reassurance that this is totally independent of the school.

6. Childcare

6.1 Research objectives

- Explore parents' experiences and use of childcare, formal and informal, including understanding the trade-offs that are made around childcare arrangements
- Identify a clear set of needs and priorities for parents in terms of how childcare services could be improved.

**Grandparents, in this research, were recruited to have specific, regular childcare responsibilities for their grandchildren. The experiences and opinions expressed by Grandparents in this sample may not be typical of other grandparents who do not have regular childcare responsibilities.*

6.2 Introduction

Childcare emerges as a sensitive and engaging issue for most across this sample. People, particularly Mums feel a sense of entitlement regarding *affordable*, high quality childcare. They believe that making childcare high quality and affordable is key to getting Mums back to work and if it is not affordable, many feel there is little point in working and can struggle to make ends meet.

*"If you're going back to work, I think it, (childcare) should be free. I got £40 a month and I was paying more for childcare than my wages."
(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)*

*"I think if you've chosen to have children and if you choose to go back to work, then you should contribute something to childcare, just not (an) extortionate amount".
(Mum, Separate Lives, London)*

Mums and Dads seem to have distinct roles regarding childcare, with Mums, from all three segments demonstrating more active and involved support when their children are younger, particularly around the practicalities of organising childcare and exploring different options open to them that ensure their children's overall happiness. Dads across the segments seem much less engaged emotionally about childcare and focus more on the financial and sometimes logistical aspects.

Respondents report that researching childcare options is a time-consuming and effortful process and most take the lead from another trusted parent or friend.

6.3 Current experiences of childcare

Mums with younger children (under 5s) needing support with childcare were easily roused when talking about their concerns, frustrations and experiences. These include finding out about childcare, tax credits, financial constraints and perceived lack of available, subsidised and high quality childcare.

*"The ideal childcare scenario from preschool to sixteen would be affordable childcare. I think that's major"
(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton)*

"I can remember when I was told I was having twins...I thought how the hell am I gonna organise this? And it was a nightmare when they were young"
(Mum, *Struggling Through*, Newcastle)

"I'm glad I'm out of that stage, it (childcare logistics) was a pain at times"
(Mum, *Stepping Back*, Nottingham)

Those Mums with older children are still able to recall the anxieties and dilemmas they faced when their children were younger and the relief they felt once their children hit Secondary school as childcare became less of a worry.

"When they were younger, I really, really struggled [with childcare]. Now at his age, I know that he can make his own way to school and make his own way back and he's got a key to let himself in if nobody's in, [but] you can't do that when they're younger. You've got to be there. Somebody's got to be there and it's just the pressure"
(Mum, *Struggling Through*, Brighton & Hove)

6.4 Childcare options and preferences

Parents of children under 5

Many parents in the sample speak of having to choose and create packages of care rather than using one option only. This might mean working shifts and juggling hours so that there is a parent at home, relying heavily on grandparents and other informal arrangements, "nursery hopping" between providers (both state-run and private), and using breakfast and after school clubs and childminders around school hours. This approach often adds to their daily pressure and need to juggle finances, children's wellbeing and work.

"I work as a taxi driver in the day and my wife works evenings, we've always done it like that. It means childcare is sorted and the kids have one parent around"
(Dad, *Struggling Through*, Liverpool)

"It was a nightmare before and it was very expensive, an' the juggling. Sometimes, my friend who [also] had a son, she would babysit for my boy. She would work and I would work and we [both] went part time so that she worked half the week and I worked half the week; and that's why I originally went three days a week just because of child costs. I stopped working full time because it was too expensive. {Because he was under 2 years old}, so we split it".

"When the kids were younger and we were still together, we worked in shifts. It was the only way we could manage. Our parents didn't live nearby"
(Non resident Dad, Brighton and Hove)

Within this package of care, for this sample of parents, informal childcare (most often Grandparents) and group settings were generally the preferred childcare options for the under 5s. Many fall back on the support of family, as they are seen as the easier to negotiate and loving option and parents feel that their children's wellbeing is assured. Grandparents, in particular were regarded as trusting, loving and cost effective carers; which were all felt to be important for parents in this sample.

“You find now that a lot of grandparents are the carers. I’m quite fortunate that my parents step in when I need them, and they work around the shifts that I work. So I’m quite lucky really. I work two shifts. One week, I work three full days, the other week, I work mornings, so when I’m working mornings, now that they’re both at school, I can drop off and pick up, but when I’m working three full days, I can drop off, but my parents will then pick them up. They’ll either take them back to theirs, or take them back to mine, but they have looked after them since they were born, when I’ve been in work as well, ‘cause I didn’t take any nursery until I got the free nursery place because I didn’t have the money to pay for nursery basically. Y’know, [for] two kids, it’s like £60 a day.”

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

Group settings from the perspective of parents in this sample are felt to be warm, involving and friendly, a place for children to develop socially and emotionally through an emphasis on learning through play. Many parents in this sample have tried group settings usually because they need/want to go back to work and also believe their child will benefit from this environment.

“My kids loved nursery, they had their little friends. I’d drop them off and they’d run in, wouldn’t even look back”

(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)

Some mums in this sample report that they appreciate being able to look at their children’s folder of achievements. They recall times where they have been invited into have a look at what their children are doing. Mums with this experience express that it helps them to feel involved and they see it as an effective way of building a positive relationship with the setting. Some also feel it helped them to build confidence in their parenting skills.

“I remember the nursery used to tell me things I could do with my son, it was nice...cute”

(Mum, Stepping Back, London)

“I like going in and seeing what she’s done”

(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)

“The nursery makes you feel welcome, they show you what the kids have done and invite you to stay. I also feel like I can complain as I’m paying”

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

Childminders, from the perspective of parents in this research sample are a less common route of childcare support as many parents seem to prefer group settings.

“I like the one to one of a childminder, but kids like playing with others”

(Mum, Separate Lives, St. Albans)

“I wanted my kids to benefit from the social side of nursery, rather than the more focused one to one of a childminder”

(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)

One parent had consistently used a childminder as they reporting liking the one to one attention or found it to be more convenient.

“I liked using a childminder more than nursery because of the one to one”.

(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton and Hove)

"We used a childminder for a bit, she lived nearby. It was cheaper than a nursery, once they were 3 they went to nursery instead"
(Mum, *Stepping Back*, Nottingham)

Many parents have heard of 'Sure Start Children's Centres' but perceive them to be for people 'harder off' than them. They refer consistently to them as 'Sure Start' and do not mention 'Children's Centres'. Many felt they would need to hear positive things about them before they dip toes and go themselves.

Parents of school age children

Whilst recognising that childcare becomes easier as children grow older, the process of searching out appropriate childcare support can still be challenging. Packages of care continue to be used by parents in this sample who rely on a mix of breakfast and after-school clubs, friends and family (still grandparents in the main). Many feel, however, that informal support for childcare can become burdensome if there are only a few people to call upon, especially during the school holidays where parents need to ensure their children are looked after for more substantial chunks of time while they are at work.

Primary school

Parents in this sample feel that the childcare options for primary school age children seem much more limited than for the under 5s. Many talk about the provision of breakfast and after school clubs and really appreciate these services. Parents report their experience of these services to be positive - they know their children enjoy being with their friends for longer during the day and it helps these busy parents manage their time.

"They have got breakfast clubs at most schools now which start at 7am I think,
(Mum, *Struggling Through*, Brighton & Hove)

"What I used to do with mine when they were in junior school is I used to put them in breakfast club, 'cause I was starting work early and finishing so I could pick them up from school, but breakfast clubs were handy and they were cheap, whereas after school clubs are really expensive. I used to do it that was, an' that was really good. They do these football club things in the holidays, but they're so expensive."
(Mum, *Struggling Through*, Newcastle)

However, parents in this sample report a mixed experience regarding access to breakfast and after school clubs to care for children around the school day. And cost is reported as a real problem, especially for those families with more than one child.

"I found it really, really hard to get breakfast and after school clubs...they said there was a three year waiting list"
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, Liverpool)

"The one breakfast club that's attached to the school takes 60 children and they're full."
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, Liverpool)

"A new after school club opened up over the school holiday, obviously by demand, but not by the school. I think it's about £7.50 for two hours, but it doesn't have a breakfast club, it's purely after school. It's Just like she'll be going from pillar to post really."
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, Liverpool)

*“The kids loved going to the afterschool club, all their friends went, but we had to cut down their days as it got expensive”
(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)*

*“They piloted a breakfast club in our area, it was free and it was really helpful, then they started asking for money. We couldn’t afford it so we were stuck”
(Mum, Struggling Through Newcastle)*

As a result, parents with primary school aged children in the sample group continue to rely on informal childcare, or work shifts to spread the childcare responsibility between both parents.

*“When they were at juniors, my husband worked in the daytime and I worked in the evenings so we would swap over. He’d finish work at four and I’d go to work at 5 and then work till 9 in the evening, and my mum used to pick the girls up from school.”
(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton & Hove)*

Secondary school

Once children have reached secondary school, travel to school independently and have mobile phones, childcare becomes less of a worry. However, parents still feel the responsibility of making sure of their children’s safety and whereabouts.

*“What I have to do in the holidays is rely on friends. I have to think, ‘right what’s my daughter going to do tomorrow? Is she going out with a friend, or if not, then she stays at her Dad’s or with my Mum...and I don’t like the thought of not knowing what she’s doing for the day. I couldn’t go to work, and have her wandering the streets. I need to know who she’s with, where she’s going, and if she’s not meeting a particular friend, and if I don’t know where she’s going, then I will take her to my sisters or my mums and I will say, ‘you’re spending the day with her.’”
(Mum, Stepping Back, London)*

School holidays

Many of the parents in the sample rely on friends and family for childcare during the school holidays, but feel this can become burdensome if there are only a few people to call upon.

*“I used to dread school holidays, ‘cause I used to think, ‘God, I’ve got seven weeks. How you gonna cover seven weeks holiday?”
(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton & Hove)*

*“I ended up relying on my parents and my sister to help during the school holidays, as she’s also got kids”
(Mum, Stepping Back, St, Albans)*

*“I usually look after one of the girls who’s aged 10, I should say on two of the evenings after school and usually during the holidays”
(Grandma, Newcastle)*

*“When she was younger I was very lucky because my mum and her dad’s mum used to have her in the school holidays when I was at work”
(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton and Hove)*

A minority of Mums - often those who are Bank clerks or work in Customer Services - have secured Term Time working which they appreciate as this takes the pressure off childcare arrangements, although some comment that it means they are financially worse off. This form of flexible working raised a lot of interest among other parents in the sample group, especially among those who are working shifts as a way to share childcare responsibilities with their partner.

Finding out about childcare and financial support

Parents in this sample found out about the childcare on offer locally through a number of different sources.

"(To find out about childcare), you'd use the internet. Just put it in and see what comes up"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

"I got a leaflet through the door"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

Parents want childcare for all ages to be trustworthy, flexible, high quality and value for money, but many report that this is hard to find as there is no clear locus of enquiry about childcare or the financial support available.

"It frustrates you, they must have a high staff turnover, 'cause you ring up (the Council) and nobody knows what you're talking about"

(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton)

"I don't know how I found out about the tax credit. I phoned someone up and asked"

(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

Furthermore, the majority in this sample feel there is a dearth of *clear* information about available childcare and financial support and would like more information about: the trade-offs between working, tax credits and costs; information on flexible care and timings; how to apply for different places and all the associated costs.

Subsequently, most rely on recommendations and information from other trusted parents. This means that much information about childcare and tax credits are found through word of mouth and highlights the importance of peer influence among Mums regarding informing, endorsing and criticising childcare decisions. Mums need clear, accessible information to enable them to make the right decisions for them and their children.

"You'd just go with recommendations from friends really. You'd look on the internet to find out more"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

"I think you go on friend's recommendations as well (as reading the Ofsted report when making a decision about childcare provision). But also, I went to see about ten different nurseries and ultimately, I went with the one I got the right feeling with"

(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)

"We all asked each other for advice about where they send their kids and what they do"

(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)

"We relied on advice from friends and family with similar age kids; the problem is everyone has a different point of view so it's still up to you to decide"
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, London)

"I heard about childcare, because I had a leaflet come through that said 'do you require, like, y'know, breakfast, after school and la la la'. I thought right here, there's someone I can ring, 'cause I was having real trouble. When I rang up, they said, 'Who gave you this number?', so I said it was on a free leaflet that came through the door. You had to hold on. They put me through to about five different people and then eventually, I spoke to someone. They said 'that number's only just gone out' or something. And then they explained to me about the wrap-around-care which has eventually paid off now."
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, Liverpool)

6.5 Financial implications: Free Entitlement, Tax credits

Childcare places a huge financial burden on the families of people in this sample. For many respondents in this sample, financial implications are cited as key in influencing decisions about work and many of the Mums remain the full-time carer of their children, particularly for those with a few children under 4 or 5. This is not to deny that decisions are contingent on a range of complex factors, however respondents in this sample cited finance as the key driver. Many report that they found staying at home to be more cost effective, than re-entering employment on part time salaries and paying for childcare.

"It's still really expensive for [childcare in a private nursery] for a day. I think it's between £30 and £40. So when you think about that and when you need it five days a week, you can't do it can you?"
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, Liverpool)

"I've left work to be a full time Mum, because it would have cost me between £1200 and £1500 a month with nursery... It just wasn't worth it. Had childcare been free I would have put them in nursery"
(Mum, *Separate Lives*, Liverpool)

Many Mums feel they should be entitled to good quality, trustworthy and inexpensive childcare. Little is known specifically about 'free entitlement' to places for 3 and 4 year olds, especially about how to find out about it and where it is valid. However, some Mums in this sample seem to be benefitting from this, even though they were unaware that it was called the 'free entitlement'.

More factual information on what the free entitlement is and how to access it is needed as people seem to guess at bits of information and ask early learning and childcare practitioners, which can be frustrating for parents as often many practitioners are not familiar with the details.

"I knew I could get something free, twelve hours I think but what about the other hours, what do I do with him then?"
(Mum, *Stepping Back*, Nottingham)

Others who do go back to work and knowingly make use of their free entitlement, report that they are struggling logistically and financially to supplement the extra hours to cover full time work and tend to rely on family members to cover the extra hours.

"I tried the education [authority] through that leaflet and the lady was saying to me, you know, have you thought about trying to get wrap-around-care for school nursery?"

And what she said is when they get these 5 sessions when they're 3 [years old], most places, unless you go to a private nursery, will either do five mornings, or five afternoons; you don't get them in a block. So where's my son goes all day Tuesday and Thursday to the private nursery, and you just pay the extra, type of thing, the schools only do five mornings or five afternoons, so she said that some schools will take them, five mornings, five afternoons, and like a lunch, similar to what my son's going to be doing, but you've got to have special circumstances, and it's got to go to like a board."

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

Views on financial support for childcare through the tax credit system seem mixed, while the notion of help with the cost of childcare is very popular, some Mums found the process of finding out about it and applying complicated. Others seem to be benefitting but are not sure whether they are receiving the correct amount of money. And often there is a sense that other people are benefitting more than them, which is due to people not being certain how to find out about their own entitlement.

"The tax credit is on...uh, you'd just Google it wouldn't you?"

(Mum, Stepping Back, Nottingham)

"(The tax credit) sounds great doesn't it"

(Mum, Separate Lives, London)

"I don't understand how the tax credit works. I got £40 a month, and I was paying more than my wages. I don't understand how I got it. Do you apply for it? I don't really think they know what they're doing in the office themselves, and then they make mistakes, and then you're the one that has to pay for it then"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

"I think I might be borderline with tax credit, and I think, you know, if I do a couple of extra hours at work, is that going to tip me over the border, or my working tax credit, and then I'll lose my working tax credit, only if I earn £50 more"

(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

"(The child tax / working tax credit) is just a big con really isn't it. I think you expect it, and then you just get this low award, even though you are struggling to pay the childcare, and then ultimately, they're trying and encourage you to go back to work. But then, I didn't want to leave work, but circumstances dictated that we couldn't afford the childcare, so I had to leave work. So I don't think you are encouraged to go back to work to be honest with you. [The child tax / working tax credit guide] isn't true is it. 'Cause my friend, she was on a comparable wage to me, and it's not true, 'cause she got a completely different award than what I did. How do they work it out?"

(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

"I had my first lad in 2002. I think that was the year that (working tax credit) first came out, 'cause I can remember that's when I got it, and I went back to work and since then I've been claiming it"

(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)

Almost no-one in this research sample seem aware of Employer-supported childcare, where employers can choose to offer their employees the option of exchanging part of their salary for tax free childcare vouchers. Either the employers of the parents in the sample do not offer vouchers or the message that this is on offer is not getting across.

6.6 Childcare by segment

As explained earlier, the sample group for this research was chosen to belong to specific attitudinal segments, identified through previous research by the DCSF to help to understand which groups of parents are harder to engage. This next section explores the childcare objectives by segment and serves to highlight the subtle but relevant differences between these 'harder to reach' groups.

6.6.1 Struggling Through Parents

Issues

Childcare often places a huge financial burden on these parents, who generally work from when their children are toddlers and often have long and irregular working hours. They are also more likely than other groups to be single Mums. They can feel anxious about the level of care provided as well as frustrated by what they perceive to be an inconsistent, oversubscribed and expensive state childcare offer. Many report that breakfast and after school clubs feel unfair, as some children miss out. Some mums seem to think that provision through schools is more expensive than private childcare and less value for money because there is a lower ratio of adults to children, but use this nonetheless when it works for them and their child/ren as it is a convenient option. The need for childcare reduces in significance for these parents once children reach Secondary school.

"Childcare is more than what we'd earn, so it defeats the object. Yeah, lots of friends that's happened to"
(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

"I found it really, really hard to get breakfast and after school clubs. It was an absolute nightmare. I mean I was on the phone for about three or four hours to the education [authority] and different people trying to sort it out because what happened with the breakfast club, where I went to enquire about the breakfast club, the girl laughed at me and said there's a three year waiting list; so I said 'why would I put my child's name down for a breakfast club when I haven't even got the school place'. It's ridiculous! And she said, no it's full, so I phoned the school and said 'what other breakfast clubs are there?', [and They replied], 'there isn't, there's just that one'. So they're not making it easy for people who work. And they don't provide after school [care]. All they have to do is recommend, or provide it. That's all they've got to do. So you're sort of just, stuck really".
(Mum, Struggling Through, Newcastle)

"Now, it's fine because I always take my daughter to school in the mornings, but the days I'm at college, or if I'm at work, she'll either get the bus home or she'll go back to friends houses and I'll pick her up from there".
(Mum, Struggling Through, Brighton & Hove)

How they respond

Struggling Through parents seem to prefer the informal childcare route when their children are younger, working shifts, juggling working hours and relying on family to support (although many may feel some guilt about this, they perceive little alternative), until their children are old enough to qualify for the free entitlement at 3 years of age. Private nurseries are perceived as a more expensive route. And later on, it is common that this group feel excluded from breakfast and afterschool clubs, especially when seeking provision for more than one child.

*“We work shifts so there’s always someone at home with the kids and it saves money”
(Dad, Struggling Through, London)*

What could help?

Struggling Through Parents require reassurance that any paid for childcare would offer value for money and be in the best interest of their child. The emotional benefits for both children and parents need to be highlighted in order to reassure parents it is the right decision.

6.6.2 Stepping Back Parents

Issues

They tend to be stay at home mums when their children are very little but can see benefits of formal childcare when they are a bit older because they generally view childcare options for under 5s as a *warm, involving & friendly and a place for child to develop socially and emotionally*. These parents like the idea of learning through play and want advice on what else they can do at home to support their child’s development.

*“It’s nice to know that you’re helping them learn while they’re having fun”
(Mum, Stepping Back, London)*

However, childcare is a delicate issue amongst their peers for this group. When their decisions about childcare go against the grain they can feel judged and uncertain, finding it hard to talk about their decisions confidently.

Stepping Back parents tend to research childcare options on the internet but feel it is hard to find the information they need, and do not always feel sure they know exactly what options are available to them. They view childcare as expensive and so want it to work for both them and their child(ren).

How they respond

Stepping Back parents are open to a mix of childcare arrangements; many receive family support and almost all have tried private nurseries if they can afford them - a preferred option for some with children under three years old. Mums, in particular, enjoy going in to see their children’s art folders, receiving verbal feedback and advice about how they can support their children. This positive experience helps them build confidence to pop in and talk to teachers, which may empower them to engage effectively with their child’s primary school. After school clubs are a popular choice with Stepping Back parents because they are safe, give children confidence and help with homework.

What could help?

Stepping Back Parents would love clear information on the different childcare options. They would also appreciate advice on what they can do at home to help their children ‘learn through play’. They want to feel supported when making enquiries, so they can be confident in the options they choose.

6.6.3 Separate Lives Parents

Issues

Separate Lives parents want to feel a bit freed up and a small minority do not work on days when they use childcare. They are willing to pay for childcare, as long as the costs are not prohibitive. Many seem concerned about practicalities, i.e. preparing for their own future and financial stability and the logistics; childcare needs to help them to have time for other important considerations in their lives.

Separate Lives parents seem to have more confidence than parents from other segments to research and ask questions around availability and financial support.

*“They have this thing called ‘Buzzy Bee Vouchers’ I never knew what that was. [It is where] they take say £200 out of your wages and well, it’s tax free, so you take home about £50 tax free home. It was a new initiative at work and they launched it, so I just completed the forms on the internet site”
(Mum, Separate Lives, Liverpool)*

How they respond

This group are open to childcare in the early years, believing in benefits of social interaction and play based learning, however, unlike Stepping Back parents they are less concerned about continuing play based learning at home.

They sometimes rely on Grandparents and other informal care (friends, siblings) but less so than other segments because they do not want to over burden friends and family.

What could help?

Separate Lives parents need to feel *informed* about their children’s childcare and education, in an effortless way. They would like clear, reliable information about childcare provision and tax credits, so they can go back to work and stay there!

6.6.4 Dads

Issues

They tend to defer to their partners’ authority about childcare - they appear quite distant from the day-to-day management. Most Dads seem aware of the expense involved and will discuss the financial aspect of childcare options, but thereafter, will distance themselves from the logistics of pick up and drop off and interactions with the childcare provider.

A small minority of fathers (self employed or shift workers), play a limited role in childcare, helping with transportation, but most are not available to do this as they are working and therefore do not regard it as their role. Most Dads are unaware of their right to parental leave (each parent is eligible for 13 weeks parental leave, unpaid at any time up to their child’s fifth birthday). In discussions, this idea jarred with many of the Dads in this segment as it they feel it may impact negatively on career prospects and thought it would not be financially viable.

*“That’s just for the rich, how could we live? On what money and when? (Talking about 13 weeks off)”
(Dad, Stepping Back, London)*

How they respond

Dads recognise that childcare is very important and can be stressful. However, their wives shoulder the majority of the responsibility and they tend to act as a sounding board.

'Stepping Back' Dads feel most strongly about having one parent around for the children, but none have seriously entertained the idea of that parent being them!

What could help?

Dads want to know what the options are the benefits and potential drawbacks of each and know the bottom line, so they can help wives make the decisions.

6.6.5 Grandparents

Please note the Grandparents in this research project were specifically recruited because they shouldered childcare responsibilities. We did not consult with any Grandparents who had no responsibility for childcare.

Issues

Whilst their love is unconditional and they enjoy time with grandchildren, some Grandparents feel they can be overburdened in their childcare duties. What begins as a pre-school childcare arrangement, can often develop into a longer term arrangement, where Grandparents have a 'day or two' per week before and after school, helping with meal times and after school activities until their children return from work. Many Grandparents report feeling stretched and tired, especially during school holidays, when they care for longer periods and feel they need to keep their grandchildren amused, by taking them on outings. The majority feel they would prefer a more flexible arrangement, rather than a fixed slot.

*"You can't just up and off, because you're depended on"
(Grandad, Brighton and Hove)*

*"I've got two grandchildren, they're twins, and I've watched them since they were babies. More when they were smaller obviously, now I pick them up once a week, and keep them till bed time. When they were smaller, I had them all day, then did the nursery run and now I pick them up from school"
(Grandma, Newcastle)*

Many Grandparents admit that their childcare role can place a strain on them financially, particularly as most do not ask their children to cover costs and have not come to any agreement with them.

*"I think it's hard on us financially. If we can give them things we will, and we enjoy looking after them, but with three or four it's expensive"
(Grandad, Brighton and Hove)*

*"If they topped up the pension, just to cover our costs, that'd be nice. Otherwise it costs me to do the running around ... I can't ask my son for the money"
(Grandma, Newcastle)*

Furthermore, many feel guilty about taking money from their children, particularly because the arrangement was initially established to help reduce the financial burden of childcare (as well as other considerations, such as parents feeling that care by grandparents was the most loving option).

“If there was a scheme that provided a financial incentive for grandparents to support with childcare, you’d end up spending it on the kids anyway. You wouldn’t think of keeping it to yourself”
(Grandma, Newcastle)

“I retired from paid work to do unpaid work. My children, well they both needed to work. They needed both their wages and I actually retired because I knew I was either going to have to pay for nursery fees or retire, so I decided to retire and help with the childcare”
(Grandma, Newcastle)

Grandparents do not want to take on the responsibility of homework and academic learning. They prefer to have fun, relaxed time with children, supporting their emotional needs.

“I help with childcare to support my children as they work really hard. We have some really special times together and do lots of fun things, like painting and playing cricket.”
(Grandma, Croydon)

How they respond

Grandparents (especially Grandmas) in this sample worry that they will be letting the family down if they say ‘no’ to requests for support. They do not feel they can openly talk about this with their children, especially if the arrangement is with sons and daughter-in-laws. It’s a ‘labour of love’!

What could help?

Grandparents do not feel they need support directly, but would feel reassured if there were other childcare alternatives for their children and grandchildren to access.

6.6.6 Non resident parents

Please note, this research consulted in depth with 4 non-resident parents. Further research with this target audience would need to be carried out in order to understand the issues in more depth. Furthermore, this section of the sample was not recruited by segment / attitude.

Issue

Non-resident parents in this sample feel left out of the childcare equation in terms of making decisions, although they all cared for their children regularly themselves. Those who lived with their child during the early years tended to take on the gender roles highlighted above.

“We’re a bit like out of sight, out of mind” (Non resident Dad, Croydon)

If they have children in preschool they report having little to contact from the childcare provider. If their children go to after school clubs / breakfast clubs they generally have no contact with people running them.

The non resident dads in this sample report that they are rarely consulted on childcare arrangements and when they do look after their children they tend to feel that they have to fit in around what has previously been arranged.

How they respond

A couple of non resident dads in the sample express some guilt about not being around to help but believe that 'it's not their fault'. As they rely on their ex wives to fill them in about what has been going on, they can feel resentful and uncomfortable, especially in cases of acrimonious splits. They seem to rely on their children to share information about childcare arrangements, to show paintings etc which can be hard.

What could help?

These parents need to feel *informed* and *included* just like resident parents, so communication from childcare providers would be welcomed. They recognise that this needs to fit in with the reality of their situation as parents who do not live with their children and are not their primary carers. They would appreciate receiving information about what childcare is provided and how their children are benefiting from the childcare provision. This could reach them by email.

6.7 Summary

Parents across the sample lacked clear, consistent information from a single source about what childcare provision and financial support is available. They need the common "word of mouth" transfer of information to be enhanced by an easy to use, credible resource.

Mums in this sample call for information that reassures supports and informs, showing an understanding of parents' emotional and practical needs around the issue of childcare. A menu of different options, their benefits and potential drawbacks would be welcome. Parents would like to be able to find information on one trustworthy website. They suggest that within this site, there would be scope for a message board to share/read other concerns about childcare, as well as providing access to a well informed adviser. This could help to empower the parents in this sample to find out about their different options in an accessible and effortless way.

When children join new schools, both primary and secondary, parents would like the school to offer affordable breakfast /after school club places to all children, not cap it at a small number.

Appendix A: Recruitment Statements & Recruitment Criteria

Parents

Parents were recruited on the following attitude statements. Only the designated attitude was represented per group:

Struggling Through Parents

I play a fairly active role in my child's life. I wish I could be with them more but I just don't have the time or energy and I feel really stretched. I really want them to do better in life than I did but how well they do at school probably won't have much impact on this. So I don't get too bothered watching over their shoulder when they're doing their homework or things like that. I reckon they're good kids.

Stepping Back Parents

I spend a lot of time with my kids but I must admit we do argue a bit, especially when they play up and I feel stretched for time. I really want them to do well at school, but think it's up to the school and my kids to sort this out; I can't do everything for them and I think children need to learn how to be independent. I think it's important for young kids that one of their parents stays at home with them (but sometimes I wish I could get out a bit more).

Separate Lives Parents

Although I love being a parent I have to admit I sometimes find it a bit frustrating. I like my kids to make their own decisions and be independent and it is up to them what they want to do/be when they are older. So if they do alright at school, fair play to them, but it's more important they get a job when they leave school and start earning money. Although I love being a parent I have to admit I do sometimes find it quite hard.

Age of children

Respondents were recruited to have at least one child (or be responsible for) in designated age:

- 11 to 19 to have none younger
- 0 to 10 to have none older

Within these mini groups all respondents had at least one child in primary education and another child in either preschool or primary (there was a mix within each group)

Grandparents

Grandparents were recruited who regularly supported and were involved with the childcare of grandchildren at least once per week. E.g. look after their grandchildren regularly, have them after school, give them tea, take care of them during school holidays

Non resident parents

These parents were recruited where they were not living with their children or anyone else's (partner). They all had a limited or no involvement with their children's education

In home observation with single respondents from mini groups

Respondents for individual depths were recruited from the mini groups. They were willing to show moderator around their home and introduce them to their children and allow their children to have a 'chat' with the moderator too. In home observations took place immediately after school

Demographics

Personality

We aimed to recruit respondents who were willing to talk in a small group with people with a similar outlook to their kids education. All the respondents needed to be keen to engage in conversation and contribute to the discussion. We expected the sessions to develop into lively discussions about personal and meaningful issues; therefore we recruited a representative cross-section of people who had the ability and confidence to articulate their views clearly and openly.

Socio-economic status

A range of socio-economic backgrounds BC1C2DE (though the attitudinal statements carried a higher weighting)

Ethnic origin and location

We ensured representative ethnic diversity across the sample

Type of Pre-school / School

All attended State pre-school / schools

Miscellaneous

No respondents had attended a research group in the last six months, or had ever been involved in any research in relation to the schools, education or Government support.

Appendix B: Pen portraits

The pen portraits contained within this document are based on research gleaned from all respondents within each recruited segment:

Struggling Through Mum

Tina, 32

"I used to dread the school holidays because you have to find seven weeks of childcare cover!"

I'm Tina; I'm 32 and have a 14 year old daughter, Kelly. I'm not with her Dad. We're pretty close as mothers and daughters go, we like doing girly things together like shopping and watching films and TV. I think we could always do more things together, but she just wants to be off with her friends now that she's a teenager.

I work during school hours in a beauty salon as a nail technician, but I'm about to start college. Doing a course means my college holidays fit in with school holidays which helps out with the whole childcare thing, which I must admit is a real headache. Luckily, my mum's around sometimes, though if not, Kelly just goes to friends and hangs out. It's easier now she's a bit older, when she was younger it was a struggle as childcare's expensive, so I ended up not working and being on benefits.

My daughter goes to the same school as I did; which is nice as I know it, but odd as I didn't like it, so I'm not that comfortable when I have to go in! I was much more involved when Kelly was at primary school and would go in and do cake sales and things, but its different now as I'm working and at college and I've no idea what they do at school. It's way above my head, I can barely count to 10 in French and what they do in Maths is like a foreign language. I'd like to know more, just to support Kelly as I know she sometimes finds it difficult, but I'm not sure how to go about it as I know I'm not clever enough and don't really have time; sometimes I'm even not sure how much to help out. I support her in my own way, as best that I can. I try and get her to eat breakfast, but she's always too tired and moody first thing. I go to parents evenings too, but find them a bit frustrating as we don't get long enough to talk and I'm not always sure about what to ask.

The school is ok, though a bit strict and the head likes writing letters home about anything and everything, some really silly stuff like skirt length. She's quick to complain to us and a bit slower to respond when we complain. I must admit when we had had a problem last year and Kelly needed to move classes she was very good. It was hard to get the initial appointment, I just kept phoning and emailing, but once we'd seen us then she took us seriously and was kind. I think when push comes to shove the school is there for you, it just sometimes feels like they don't want to know.

Struggling Through Dad

Andy, 27

"I never help with homework, I'm not that bright so I just shy away. I'd say I give them moral support."

My name is Andy; I work as a cabbie in London and live with my wife who looks after our children. We have a boy who's just turned eight and a daughter who's six.

My wife tends to take care of all the schooling matters as she has more time *and* more patience. I can get really impatient and frustrated with my children when I try to help, so it's best my wife supports them. There are also often problems in communication if I get involved. It's really hard nowadays. I try to encourage both my children to do their homework. For example, I bought a new computer so they can use Google. We also have a rule in our house: *homework first, before TV and before tea*. It's best that way, otherwise, give them an inch and they'll take a mile. It's the only way I can get them to work if my wife's too busy. I can't help them with their maths or anything like that though. Everything's too difficult. It's all changed how they do the sums since when I was at school and I found it hard enough then.

I didn't appreciate school. I was a bit of a tear-away. I'm sorry now though. I wish I'd tried harder, but you can't change the past. I've never gone back and done any courses and I wouldn't want to. For one, I just wouldn't have the time and also, I'd feel a bit thick, and would probably just get too embarrassed.

I don't really get too involved in the day to day school matters. It's the wife's job. If there are any complaints that need to be made she'll be the one to sort that out. I'd help out if there was something really serious though, say if one of my children was getting bullied, I'd be right up there with my wife, but half the time, it seems that it's the school complaining to us parents over silly things. Like, once, I was called up and brought into school because my lad had kicked a football after he'd been told not to. I was really angry when they told me. I mean it was just really over the top!

When my son was five, my wife and I went to complain to the school because they'd told us that he was seeing a behavioural expert because he was too active and boisterous in class. I thought it was a bit strong saying he was 'too active', so I complained to the headmaster. I didn't hear anything for weeks, I got so angry at the time, because I just didn't feel listened to and they were expecting my son to behave like an adult when he was so young.

Separate Lives Mum

Jane, 33

"I'm barely breaking even to go to work, but I do that for the future."

My name is Jane. I'm a young mum in my early thirties with three kids - two teenagers that I had close together when I was a teenager myself and a 3 year old boy. I live with my partner, (I'm not actually married but have been with him forever!), on a small farm with our kids in the suburbs of London. The farm produces hay which my husband is responsible for and I look after the horses, three of which we own and the rest which we look after for other people.

My little boy who is just three stays with me during the day. He doesn't go to nursery because the local primary school does not have a nursery attached and I therefore assume it costs money which I cannot afford so he is waiting until reception.

I didn't do that well at school, and I fell pregnant at 16 with my first child. I spent much of my twenties looking after and bringing up my two girls. Life was a struggle and I felt a bit left behind as everyone else was getting on, 'having a life' and I was stuck at home with two young kids; although, I don't regret that I had my kids so young and we're very close. I am happy with whatever they want to do and I've said that I won't pressurize them into doing anything they don't want to.

When it comes to homework and helping out my kids I find it hard as most of the work they do is 'way too above me' and I actually get frustrated as I can't actually help them. The girls seem to cope well and that they don't ask me or their dad for much help anyway. Both girls tend to do their homework at school in lunchtime.

I rarely get involved with the school, only when I feel I really have to or they contact me for some reason. I haven't ever made a complaint to the school and can't ever imagine doing so. I would worry that the school wouldn't really listen and that I am just one person and my voice wouldn't really be heard. The only time I would 'shout' would be if it was anything to do with bullying or my kids' safety.

I am a very busy mum, juggling my life on the farm with looking after a 3 year old and my girls and I'm also about to begin an access course at college to allow me to get on a midwifery course next year. I feel the time has come to do something for myself and to feel like *someone*, not just a mum!

Separate Lives Dad

Daniel, 48

"My son is doing very well at school. He's a geek I suppose."

I live with my wife and ten year old son, Jack in Nottingham. I feel limited in terms of what I can do to help Jack. Unfortunately, because of the very long hours that I work, we don't have a lot of time to see each other. I don't get too involved in his school work. I sometimes find it hard to engage his attention; the methods they use these days are different to the way I was taught. He's doing very well though. I don't really think my support is required!

I work very long hours, always have done. I think it's good for Jack to see this. My wife also works full time. She has a PA position at a high street bank. We've both worked hard to achieve what we have, and we're in a position to give Jack what he needs.

I use the internet to seek advice on what we should be doing for Jack. He's also got his own email account which I know he uses regularly to catch up with his friends. We got him a mobile phone recently. I think we're providing well for him.

We also pay for additional tuition for Jack outside of school to get the best from him. The in-laws help with this. He actually likes it I think. It's good for him to have so much at an early age, so he can make the most out of his life. I must admit, we don't speak closely all that much, but children grow up quicker these days don't they. It's good for him to become independent and gain his confidence at a young age.

Jack regularly outwits us and catches us making things up. He's smart like that. When it comes to homework, we know that Jack gets it all done, and we're stretching his potential with the tutor. We let the school guide him on how to do his homework, I must admit, I'm a bit lazy with that side of everything and don't get too involved. It's not really my job. I provide a home for him and set a good example.

Stepping Back Mum

Linda, 48

“School is all about growing up and being independent; and actually, parenthood is a big enough responsibility.”

Hi, I'm Lyn. I live in London with my husband, two teenage daughters, and my son who is aged eleven. My husband is a self employed heating engineer and I work for the local council. I have an incredibly busy life. I work full time. There's a lot to juggle but fortunately we also have informal childcare arrangements with my mother.

The secondary school my children attend seem to be doing a good job. I want my children to do well so they can get a nice stable, office job.

Everything seemed to be so different when I was their age. The goalposts have moved now. I used to help my children a lot at primary school...to the extent that I would end up doing their work sometimes. Though now they're older, I think it's best to leave the children to get on with it on their own now. To be honest, I think I've already helped them too much. I mean, secondary school is all about growing up and being independent isn't it, and actually, parenthood is a big enough responsibility; you don't want to have to teach them all the time as well! I think I think I've done my bit there. We help our children with the things they need though, for example, we bought them all a USP memory stick so they can transfer work from home to school.

I've heard that the secondary school may start to run some evening classes to teach parents more up-to-date strategies, so we can support our children more with their homework. It's not one for me thanks! I've helped enough already and now it's time to step back and let them get on with becoming independent.

I keep up to date with school issues through the various news updates and letters so I know what's going on. In fact, to be honest, I sometimes feel bombarded with the amount of letters my children bring home. It would be good if the school used their website to support parents more.

At the beginning of this year my son was bullied. I made a complaint but nothing was done. It was like the school were afraid to use the word 'bullying'. They didn't seem clear about what to do, but said they'd investigate my complaint. However, they didn't and so after three weeks of hearing nothing, and my son still being bullied, I went in with my husband. I had to push an awful lot. I had to complain a lot to get anything done. I think it would work better if they had an independent panel to deal with complaints.

Stepping Back Dad

Jack, 38

“When we tell our son off, he’s not bothered. He’s not bothered.”

Hi, I’m Jack, a hard working Dad with a girl aged 4 and a boy who is 8. I work fairly locally in IT, working typical 40 hour week. I leave the house around 7.45.

My wife is a ‘stay at home mum’. Though now the kids are both at school all day, she is thinking about getting a part time job that fits in with school times. She makes most of the decisions when it comes to the kids as this is part of her job / her responsibility as I go out to work. I am quite a traditionalist in that I think that a kid needs to have their mother there when they get home from school especially in the early years of education. As a family we have never considered childcare outside of the family why would we? We have family support and my wife doesn’t work and also it costs a lot, so not something we have ever thought about.

My role in the house is to ‘provide’ and I like my wife to tell me what I should do in relation to the kids. My wife likes to wake up slowly (*she’s not a morning person*) so I am in charge of getting the kids ready for school although she gets everything ready for them the night before, uniforms out, lunches prepared etc. I make breakfast and make sure they are dressed then pass on any responsibility when I need to leave.

I rarely get involved with homework, as I don’t see that it is my role. I have some interest in what goes on at school but I don’t ask - my wife just always tells me.

I go to school when I have to, for parents evening, shows etc. I don’t know why, but head teachers still scare me! This goes back to the days when I was at school. I do wish I had done better and I often tell my son that he needs to work hard at school.

I never get involved in speaking to the school - again this is my wife’s responsibility but I imagine I would/will if it is in relation to my kids’ well being (bullying etc).

I do feel that school has the responsibility to educate my kids and my role is to have fun with them. I like the idea of spending more time with my kids if I could, but money won’t allow and I wouldn’t take time out of my career as this would affect my position. I realise that bringing up the kids isn’t easy for my wife and I don’t particularly feel that the Government recognise this. The Government should pay mums a lot more to stay at home and look after the kids they should give them a proper incentive because it really is one of the most important jobs you’ll ever get!

Non Resident Dad

Eric, 44

“Until last year I didn’t even know what their school looked like.”

Hi I’m Eric and I’m 44. I’m divorced with 2 kids who are both at secondary school my son is 16 and my daughter’s 14. We were all living in Brighton until their mum met a new fellow and moved down the coast to Southampton. They moved about 6 years ago, when my daughter was in the middle of primary and my son about to start secondary. Now they come and visit for holidays, but it’s not the same.

We got divorced a long time back, when my kids were 4 and 6. But we managed to share the responsibilities. We tended to have them half a week each which I loved. It meant I got to take them to school, help them with their homework go to parents’ evenings; just be involved generally. But then my ex-wife met a new fellow. I’d still have the kids a couple of days a week but wouldn’t ‘be required’ to go to meetings. I probably sound really bitter; I guess I am. What I found most hard was the radio silence from the schools. I lost all contact with how the kids were getting on and my ex-wife didn’t keep me informed. The kids would always chat, but it’s good to know what’s happening from the teacher’s perspective.

Contact with school and involvement in their education got worse when they moved away, not only was it to a different city but secondary school which assumes less contact. Until last year I didn’t even know what their school looked like. Imagine that. Not a parents’ evening, nor a sports day; the ex’ deliberately didn’t let me know what was going on and the kids just wanted to be light hearted when we chatted. I’d always been involved in decisions and issues related to my kids, even childcare when they were really little. But now it was different, they lived so far away and their ‘step dad’ got involved. But it was my role and I wanted to fulfil it.

I was called up when day, when there was a crisis with my daughter at school and my ex didn’t know what else to do. I drove down to Southampton immediately and sat with them and the head working things through. I went a few times until the issue was resolved. I’m sad that it took something really serious for them to involve me but glad in a way as now I have much more contact. The school knows I’m sound, interested and supportive and have since put me on their mailing list (despite my ex’ saying it wasn’t necessary) and they keep me updated with my daughter’s progress.

Grandfather

George, 71

"We're fighting Alzheimer's what do we want to know about new methods of teaching for!"

I retired just over eight years ago, I part owned the business and sold my share to my business partner. I'm waiting to have 'me-time' where I can put my feet up. Instead, my wife and I spend two days a week as glorified babysitters for my two Grandsons who are 6 and 9 (and their other Grandma looks after them one day a week). When we're not supporting them physically and mentally, we're propping them up financially.

My daughter in law needed to go back to work but couldn't afford to put them into nursery, as it's so expensive, and they didn't really want strangers looking after the kids. When they started at nursery and school, they still needed to be picked up and looked after until she finishes work. During the school holidays we have them all day, which we're glad we can still do but for how much longer I'm not sure. Second time round it's lovely but harder work, more responsibility as they're not yours.

My wife and I see it as a labour of love! We've got a very special relationship with our grandsons and to be honest we'd much rather they were with us than some stranger. I think we are involved in helping them learn about life rather than helping them with education. Education is not my role. That's their parents' job; we're just a support helping where we can. To be honest, the methods of teaching are so different today I can't keep up. I got told off for trying to help them with maths homework as it was a different arithmetic! The answers were the same!

Instead of education, we give them the wisdom of our years, patience and understanding. We also teach them things they don't get to learn today such as woodwork, cooking, cricket, we go for walks in the woods; getting them away from that wretched Play Station. I don't need support from the Government or their school in caring for them, my children need better childcare options that are affordable, safe and fit around their working hours. I know what I know and I managed to bring up my own kids who are doing so I can't be that bad at this childcare thing. I don't need to learn new things to do this role; I'm just a grandparent helping out... and one that's fighting Alzheimer's!

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