



## Strathprints Institutional Repository

Stalker, K. and Brunner, Richard and Maguire, R. and Mitchell, June (2009) *Supporting disabled parents' involvement in their children's education. Good practice guidance for schools.* [Report]

Strathprints is designed to allow users to access the research output of the University of Strathclyde. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may not engage in further distribution of the material for any profitmaking activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute both the url (<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/>) and the content of this paper for research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge.

Any correspondence concerning this service should be sent to Strathprints administrator: <mailto:strathprints@strath.ac.uk>



## GUIDANCE

# Supporting disabled parents' involvement in their children's education

Good practice guidance for schools

Richard Brunner, Roseann Maguire, Kirsten Stalker, June Mitchell  
Department of Educational and Professional Studies, University of Strathclyde

## Welcome to CfBT Education Trust



CfBT Education Trust is a leading charity providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Established 40 years ago, CfBT Education Trust now has an annual turnover exceeding £100 million and employs more than 2,000 staff worldwide who support educational reform, teach, advise, research and train.

Since we were founded, we have worked in more than 40 countries around the world. Our work involves teacher and leadership training, curriculum design and school improvement services. The majority of staff provide services direct to learners in schools or through projects for excluded pupils, in young offender institutions and in advice and guidance for young people.

We have worked successfully to implement reform programmes for governments throughout the world. Current examples include the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Programme for Gifted and Talented Education and a nationwide teacher training programme for the Malaysian Ministry of Education. Other government clients include the Brunei Ministry of Education, the Abu Dhabi Education Council, aid donors such as the European Union (EU), the Department for International Development (DfID), the World Bank, national agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and local authorities.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in educational research and development. Our new research programme – Evidence for Education – will improve educational practice on the ground and widen access to research in the UK and overseas.

Visit [www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com) for more information.

---

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of CfBT Education Trust.

© CfBT copyright 2009

All rights reserved

## Contents

Introduction	1
1. Ways of being involved	7
2. Types of support that help disabled parents to be equally involved	10
3. The importance of good communication with disabled parents	15
4. The importance of leadership and school ethos	18
5. How can schools help parents to disclose impairments?	23
6. Conclusion	28
Resources	31

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank:

- Members of the Research Advisory Group;
- The disabled parents, key informants and education professionals who gave their time to be interviewed for the project;
- The many voluntary and statutory sector organisations and networks who helped with recruitment of disabled parents;
- CfBT Education Trust for funding the research and Karen Whitby, Research Manager at CfBT, for her advice and support;
- Professor Charles Desforges for comments and suggestions.

## Related documents

This Guidance document is one part of a set of four publications resulting from this research. A research report, parents' leaflet and accessible summary are also available at [www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com).

This document is available in other formats on request. Contact [research@cfbt.com](mailto:research@cfbt.com).

## Introduction

“...the voices of a range of disabled parents describing how good practice in schools has helped them to be involved in their children’s education.”

In this guidance you will find the voices of a range of disabled parents describing how good practice in schools has helped them to be involved in their children’s education. The guidance is based on the findings of a research project. It is intended for people working in schools, especially heads and teachers seeking to improve parental participation and inclusion. Education policy makers and Inspectorates may find it helpful for informing their reviews of policy and practice. It may also be of interest to disabled parents and the disability voluntary sector.

The document contains information about current UK policies on parental involvement and describes the research project which investigated the perceptions of disabled parents. It looks at five different aspects of parental involvement, giving examples of good practice and highlighting suggestions as these emerged from the research project. Key points are summarised in the conclusion, while the appendices include useful resources and contacts.

### A note on terminology

This research is informed by the social model of disability which recognises that disability is created by material and social barriers. The terms ‘disability’/ ‘disabled’ and ‘impairment’ are used throughout the report in a way that is consistent with this approach. However, account is also taken of recent work in disability studies which acknowledges the implications of specific impairments.<sup>1</sup>

An inclusive definition of ‘disabled parent’ is used. Interviewees self-defined as disabled parents and no attempt was made, for example, to find out whether parents met criteria as defined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas, C. (1999) *Female Forms: experiencing and understanding disability* Buckingham: Open University Press; Shakespeare, T. (2006) *Disability Rights and Wrongs* London: Routledge.



## Parental involvement in schools – the policy framework

Supporting parents' participation in their children's schooling has been a goal of education policy for decades. Since 1997 parents have been seen as partners for schools in improving educational standards, with an *entitlement* to be involved (DfES 2000; DCSF Standards Site).<sup>2</sup> Although there are differences in devolved policies across the four jurisdictions of the UK, parents are expected to be involved at three levels:

- In helping their own children to learn ('individual child's learning');
- In the life of the school;
- On representative bodies.

Parental participation is promoted in England, Wales and Northern Ireland through policy and guidance. In Scotland it has also been supported through specific legislation – the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006.

Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 applies across Britain. It places a duty on educational institutions to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that disabled people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled people. 'Reasonable adjustments' comprise a series of duties falling into three areas: changing practices, policies and procedures; providing auxiliary aids and services; and overcoming a physical feature by removing, altering or avoiding it, or by providing the service through alternative means. Within a school, reasonable adjustments must be made for disabled children, parents, staff and visitors. These duties are 'anticipatory', meaning that institutions should anticipate the general requirements of those with a wide range of impairments.

---

<sup>2</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families *Standards* [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement/pwp/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement/pwp/) (sourced 5 July 2009).

Department for Education and Skills (2000) *Schools, Parents and Parental Responsibility*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

**“ Human rights place authorities in the UK under an obligation to treat disabled people with fairness, equality, dignity and respect. ”**

The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 introduced a Disability Equality Duty for most public authorities in England, Wales and Scotland requiring them to:

- Promote equality between disabled and non-disabled people;
- Eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment of disabled people;
- Promote positive attitudes towards disabled people; and
- Encourage participation by disabled people in public life.

Authorities must also publish a Disability Equality Scheme (DES) setting out information about how this will happen, and involve disabled people in producing the Scheme. The Disability Equality Duty in England and Wales specifies that most individual schools, as well as education authorities, are required to produce a DES. In Scotland it specifies that education authorities, and only grant-aided schools, are required to do so.

### **Why does disabled parents' involvement in schools matter?**

#### ***Implementing equality, citizenship and human rights principles***

Human rights place authorities in the UK under an obligation to treat disabled people with fairness, equality, dignity and respect.<sup>3</sup> These principles underpin arguments for equality of citizenship and participation advocated by disabled activists for decades. They also underwrite equal opportunities policies that are part of everyday life at school, local authority and government levels.

---

<sup>3</sup> British Institute for Human Rights *Your Human Rights – A Guide for Disabled People* [http://www.bihhr.org.uk/sites/default/files/bihr\\_disabled\\_guide.pdf](http://www.bihhr.org.uk/sites/default/files/bihr_disabled_guide.pdf) (sourced 6 July 2009).



### ***Implementing legal obligations***

The Human Rights Act 1998 makes it unlawful for a public authority to act, or fail to act, in a way that is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Article 14 of the ECHR confers protection against discrimination. The DDA 1995 also offers disabled people protection against discrimination, including in access to goods, facilities and services. This covers functions carried out by public authorities, such as education authorities and schools.

### ***Contributing to academic excellence and supporting social inclusion***

It is recognised that children do better academically at school when parents are involved in their education.<sup>4</sup> Recent evidence suggests that whilst learning at home makes a positive difference to children's educational outcomes, involvement in the school may also improve social and community outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Therefore for every child to have an equal chance to achieve academically and 'do well' at school, all parents must receive the support they need in order to be equally involved with their individual child's learning and with the school more widely.

---

<sup>4</sup> Desforges, C. with Abouchaar, A. (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review* DfES Research Report 433 London: Department for Education and Skills.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, A. and Goodall, J. (2008) *Do Parents Know They Matter? Engaging All Parents in Learning* Educational Research 50 (3): 277-289

<sup>6</sup> Olsen, R. and Wates, M. (2003) *Disabled Parents: Examining Research Assumptions* Dartington: Research in Practice.

### **Who are disabled parents?**

Defining disability is complex and can be contentious. Many impairments fluctuate, people acquire and lose impairments, and the impacts of impairments vary according to the circumstances in which disabled people find themselves. Statistical definitions of disability also vary. A person with a long-term limiting illness or health problem may be legally encompassed as a 'disabled person' but may not personally identify with this description. Nevertheless, estimating the number of disabled parents may help to conquer the 'invisibility'<sup>6</sup> of this group. It may also provide evidence to better support schools and local authorities to plan for and resource the involvement of disabled parents.

**“ This project has explored ‘what works’ in supporting parents with different types of impairment to be involved in their children’s education. ”**

So, although there is not one established figure for the number of disabled parents, the evidence suggests the following:

- Disabled people are statistically as likely as non-disabled people to have dependent children;
- In the average school at least one parent in nine is likely to be disabled;
- The number of disabled parents is increasing over time; and
- Disabled parents are more likely than non-disabled parents to be affected by poverty, to be lone parents and to have disabled children.

### **What is this research about?**

Previous research has shown that there are groups of parents who face particular barriers to involvement. This project has explored ‘what works’ in supporting parents with different types of impairment to be involved in their children’s education. The results do not represent the experiences of all disabled parents.

The aims of the research were:

- To examine the UK policy and research context relating to disabled parents’ involvement in their children’s education;
- To explore disabled parents’ experiences of involvement in their children’s education, with a focus on good practice; and
- To identify factors which help promote good professional practice in this area, what impedes the process and how any barriers can be reduced.

The research methods were:

- A critical review of UK-wide policy and a review of relevant research;

- 12 interviews with ‘key informants’: senior policy makers in the statutory and voluntary sectors working on parental involvement across the UK;
- 24 interviews with disabled parents who had good experiences of being involved in their children’s education. These included:
  - parents with a range of impairments: physical impairments, sensory impairments, learning disabilities and mental distress<sup>7</sup>, sometimes combined;
  - four men and 20 women, including one grandparent;
  - 11 parents from Scotland and 13 from England;
  - parents with children at secondary, primary, special and nursery schools, and using a childminder<sup>8</sup>; and
- six interviews with professionals nominated by parental interviewees.

---

<sup>7</sup> We use ‘mental distress’ because it is a term favoured by the movement of users/ survivors of psychiatric services. Other terms commonly used denote or imply illness.

<sup>8</sup> We included a parent with a childminder who wanted to participate in the study because her childminder was following the Early Years Foundation Stage of the National Curriculum (England).

More details about the methods used can be found in the full research report for this study at [www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com).

## 1. Ways of being involved

Disabled parents in the study had noticed improvements in parental involvement in schools over recent years. The examples which follow suggest that the policy focus on increasing parental involvement is reaching these parents.

### Parents said the following types of approaches and supports work well:

#### *Involvement in individual child's learning*

“ Disabled parents find parent-child learning and support groups helpful, from pre-school to secondary school. ”

- Disabled parents welcome receiving information from schools in the right accessible format. This includes, for example, verbal information for parents who don't read. Raised formats, Braille labelling, and being given two reading books rather than one, can help parents with different visual impairments.
- Some parents find specific information about their own child's learning helpful. If provided in advance, they can plan ahead on how to support their children with homework.
- Parents with learning disabilities benefit from teachers explaining children's homework to them orally.
- Sometimes parents' impairments make them tired or mental distress makes concentration difficult. Homework clubs are of help here.
- Disabled parents find parent-child learning and support groups helpful, from pre-school to secondary school. These work best when they do not make parents or children feel stigmatised.
- Some schools have dedicated staff to support families where a child needs extra help (e.g. pastoral care staff, parent liaison officers and extended school services). Disabled parents can find these staff very helpful.

***'My Depute Head has responsibility for support for learning but I have a 'point four' Support for Learning Co-ordinator who I require to be quite proactive in knowing the children, knowing the parents and being involved in their situation – a dedicated member of staff really. ... and we had employed a parent partnership officer and that was a very good initiative because she liaised with all the primary schools and children...'***

### ***Involvement in the life of the school***

- Disabled parents told us about some very good experiences of volunteering in schools. Key aspects were flexibility by the school and trust between the school and the disabled parent. A parent gave an example of wanting to volunteer at her child's school. The school had a flexible policy that allowed parents to volunteer for as many hours as they liked and to help children with a subject of their own choice. The school had a disclosure form for volunteers to complete. The parent had been admitted to hospital with mental distress, sometimes sectioned by the police. She decided to disclose her mental distress to the Head, since issues might come out in the police check. The Head's attitudes prior to disclosure gave her the strength to trust him. He was very understanding and made it clear that her mental distress would not be a barrier. He also made it clear that confidentiality about her mental health would remain with him. She now volunteers at the school for three hours a week.
- Openness to reasonable adjustments helps with volunteering. One parent's school had made an adjustment to enable her to help in areas of school that were accessible to her wheelchair.
- Sometimes volunteering helps to reduce social isolation: ***'... it gives me something to do... it gets me involved'***

*in the school which I'm quite happy to if the school asks me anything to do with the groups and things like that...'*

- Adjustments by schools enable parents to get involved in other ways. For instance, a parent with a visual impairment described how she had been supported to participate in the life of the school: ***'They have coffee mornings once a term and they have like bingo... the classroom assistant has actually got the bingo ticket and went and enlarged it to an A3 piece of paper so I could join in as well.'***

#### ***Involvement on representative bodies***

- Some schools actively encourage disabled parents to get involved in Parent Councils and Governing Boards. One parent body had an equality sub-group.
- Representative bodies can include disabled parents by sending information in accessible formats and in advance, by avoiding evening meetings and by recognising that some parents will need support to become involved and to stay involved.
- One parent suggested that a diverse parent body may be good for the image of the school.

A parent governor at his child's school commented:

***'I found the whole thing to be very positive because the Head Teacher was very good, proactive and enthusiastic particularly to have a visually impaired parent governor on board. I was always contacted about a week before the meetings and I had all the information. Any paperwork was e-mailed and if there was anything that sprung up on the day then one of them would go through it with me just before the meeting.'***



## 2. Types of support that help disabled parents to be equally involved

The types of approaches that parents said work well are in four categories:

### Generic support for all parents which disabled parents also find helpful

- Flexible support provided by the school for the benefit of all parents is particularly helpful for some disabled parents. Parents with mental distress said that accessible breakfast clubs, homework clubs and after-school groups could relieve the pressure when they were experiencing a crisis. ***'With homework and things, it can be difficult at times; it depends on how well I am. So there are homework clubs that [child] has had access to, and they've encouraged her to go along to them, so that's been great as well.'***
- Heads and teachers are often available in the playgrounds before and after school, allowing disabled parents to build trust with the staff and for issues and concerns to be checked informally and face to face. Parents with hearing impairments found this particularly helpful, but it sent out clear messages to all disabled parents.

### Individual adjustments for disabled parents

- School office staff and security staff can play roles in the way that they communicate with individual parents, for example liaising to make sure that there is support to access the school building. ***'I have a car parking pass so I can park straight into the car park. I can't use the main entrance because it's stepped so there's always somebody waiting for me at events to let me in through what is a fire entrance...'***

“ **Parents with learning disabilities said how helpful it could be for schools to explain their child’s homework to them orally.** ”

- Some adjustments are valued by disabled parents enabling them to attend school events or parent evenings. **‘I’d let them know that I had bought the ticket and there’s always a wheelchair space made available and to accommodate the rest of my party as well.’** Schools can check with parents with visual impairments about where they and their family need to sit. Some disabled parents reported how their schools had made sure that events held off school premises were accessible to them.
- Parents with learning disabilities said how helpful it could be for schools to explain their child’s homework to them orally. The Assistant Head at a school attended by the daughter of a parent with learning disabilities said: **‘it’s just that making sure that staff just spend that little bit more time explaining the homework to [daughter] as opposed to somebody who might go home and their parents do it.’**
- Blind parents said that schools sometimes needed to act as their ‘eyes’ and support them with managing their child’s visible behaviours.
- Proactive but unobtrusive support can make a difference. A parent with mental distress said: **‘...I do have a sort of feeling of being ashamed of having difficulties. It’s not something I talk about... so it’s quite good that somebody understands when I’m not being chatty, or if I don’t turn up why I’m not there. It’s having that understanding and [parent support adviser] giving a wee phone call and saying oh how are you.’**
- Special visiting arrangements to choose schools can provide disabled parents with an equal opportunity to apply to the right school for their child.

A blind parent described possible adjustments to enable her to view a nursery:

***'I'd want to know where she's going to be changed because I know as a parent you can just look in and glance and yes, that's all right. I want to feel the size of the toilets and things like that so I know what she's talking about because otherwise if she starts saying something like I couldn't sit on the toilet today I'd confidently say to her yes you can. I'd want to know the tables that she's going to be sitting at, the types of pens she's going to be using, the thickness of the paper because if she comes home with a drawing and a newsletter I'll be able to tell a difference between the thicknesses of the paper... I think it's probably beneficial for every kind of disability to have that opportunity to actually walk round the nursery or a primary school, whatever, when there are no children in it because you need to get orientated and you need to be able to know whether you can get through with your guide dog or whether you can fit your wheelchair through doors and you don't want to be discovering that when there's a load of children in the building really.'***

- Schools can make sure that school is a place of respite and stability when children are worried about the fluctuating health of their parent(s) or when they have stress at home related to lack of support for their parent's impairment.

A parent with learning disabilities and the school were interviewed separately:

Parent: ***'What they do is they help your little girl with problems that she comes across like sometimes if I'm really not well she's worried, she doesn't want to leave us, so they put things in place to help [child] at school which is really good and she's got someone she can talk to and they ask her every day if she's all right, if I'm all right and stuff like that.'***

School: ... *We also have what we call a pupil referral panel. [Child] is one that we discuss very regularly because of the issues and the health reasons and [child] has been allocated a... learning mentor, a family worker who works with families who have got disabilities. Sometimes [child] would come in and she was in a little bit of a flap because mum hadn't had a particularly wonderful morning, she'd had to sort mum out... and so we gave her the option of going to registration or being registered in our learning support department where for ten minutes she could just kind of chill out, just get her head together before the bell went and she was off to her lessons.'*

### **Anticipatory adjustments for disabled parents**

- Parents sometimes found physical accessibility much better in new-build schools. *'We've got the new school... They've thought about things like lighting, acoustics ... and it's actually a pleasure. They've got automatic doors and things like this, very easily moveable furniture. ... everything has been designed so that a disabled child, disabled parent has got total access to every part of the building.'*
- The way in which schools consider how furniture is laid out can make a difference. *'Getting around things is much easier here than in the old school. When they're putting the furniture out they think about the fact that there's going to be a wheelchair coming in....'*
- One parent was in a disabled person's group, where the local authority supported the group to carry out accessibility audits of school buildings, including new-builds.

## Working with other agencies to support disabled parents and families

- Parents gave examples of schools working flexibly with external support agencies e.g. social work, carers, parent/family support groups, young carers' organisations and the voluntary sector. ***'They are quite happy to talk to social services about the ramp and services that I need... and say that this is affecting John's education and this is what I need.'***
- A Head Teacher noted: ***'...we try to involve all the agencies and make sure that we're communicating with health and social work and psychological services et cetera whether it be about the child or if there's issues concerning the parent too. We don't operate in isolation; other people are contributing to the family as well so it's looking at the bigger picture...'***

A parent with a visual impairment talked about how her school took forward the suggestions of guide dog workers:

***'It was the suggestion of guide dog workers initially, just to talk about why the dog was allowed into school and not to stroke the dog and the Headmistress had decided you know maybe we need to go into more depth and explain why, that I had a sight problem and also that [daughter] had a sight problem as well so the children were aware of her problems as well as mine. The dog came along and we did some practical to show the children how she worked... [It made] a big difference to me because before I got the dog I used to have to rely on other people, so I could go there independently... it made going along to the school to pick [daughter] up, drop her off, go to coffee mornings, a lot easier for me.'***

### 3. The importance of good communication with disabled parents

Accessible and consistent communication helps disabled parents to become and to stay involved. The types of communication that work well fall into four categories.

“ Disabled parents value communication in accessible formats. ”

#### Accessibility

- Disabled parents value communication in accessible formats. Parents find home-school communications, e.g. newsletters and diaries, helpful in keeping up with their child’s learning and school developments. These must be in a format accessible to each disabled parent.
- There are some specific issues affecting parents with hearing impairments: ***‘My child’s off sick, he’s not going to make it. If I had an address either by text that goes straight to them or like an instant message to [school].’*** Parents should be informed if schools offer services such as a generic email address or a mobile phone kept next to the switchboard. Communication needs will differ for each parent with a hearing impairment.
- The timing of communication may need to be adjusted for disabled parents. Talking to the parent will help get this right. One professional said: ***‘Flexibility was key. She [parent] could have good days, bad days et cetera. It was basically around ensuring that she had access to information, that her meetings were scheduled in such a way that she could access them and come along and also for parents’ nights as well, ensuring that she had an earlier slot.’***



## Consistency

- Disabled parents also had experiences of being let down when communication adjustments happened once or twice and then stopped. It is important that parents have confidence that any support with communication will be sustained. For example, a visually impaired parent needed to know when his child started school that staff had considered how to support him with his child's reading homework as his child moved up primary school.
- All staff involved with a disabled parent need to consistently use the agreed communication adjustments. One parent received large-print papers for meetings about their child, but the school newsletter was sent in regular print. Another school had set up a 'home and school' book to help communication, but this became very frustrating for the parent when the school did not respond to questions that she had written in the book. Another parent suggested: ***'All the staff are really helpful; the staff in the office are really helpful. We had one classroom assistant when [child] was like in infants part of the school, she was really good at enlarging stuff and I think the rest of the staff just followed her example.'***

## Informality and flexibility

- Many parents commented on how the informal atmosphere of their child's school made it easier for them to approach teachers with concerns and how this enhanced communication. ***'There's an open door policy with both the Headmaster and the teachers so that if you ever felt oh well I need to go and talk about something specific either relating to the children's education or home life you can either make an appointment with the Head Teacher or you can just go and talk to the teacher at any time that suits you.'*** One professional commented that her school has non-teaching pastoral care staff always available

“ *It is important that parents have confidence that any support with communication will be sustained.* ”

for parents, which was helpful for a parent with learning disabilities.

- Disabled parents said that formal meetings – transition meetings, school placement meetings and meetings about getting the right support in place for their child – were stressful, particularly for parents with mental distress.
- Another group for whom meetings could be especially difficult were those whose children had additional support needs. The issue here was the *number* of meetings they attended, indicating a need to reduce the frequency of meetings and avoid unnecessary duplication.
- Disabled parents said that schools can help ease the stress of meetings by being flexible about time and venue, conducting meetings more informally, keeping meetings as small as possible and making sure that the parent has support to participate fully.

### **Communicating directly with the parent**

- Whatever support a parent may use, schools should ensure the parents (or the adults with parental rights) are always the people whom the school communicates with regarding the child. One parent who used a personal assistant was highly critical of the school communicating information about her child to her assistant.

## 4. The importance of leadership and school ethos

There was general agreement that more work was required to overcome attitudinal barriers in schools. The awareness of everyone, including head, teachers, classroom assistants, non-teaching staff, and other parents and children is important. The types of approaches that work well fall into several categories.

### The leadership of the head teacher

- The role of the head teacher in promoting an inclusive ethos is crucial. *'...over the years even the Head Teacher recognised me and would like come up and say do you need anything? Can I get you a cup of tea? Just things like that can make such a difference so you don't feel like you are hiding in the corner, getting in the way.'* One Head Teacher commented: *'If somebody has a mental illness the one thing they must have is a door always open and you always have to be receptive to listen, you might not agree with what they're saying or how they're saying it but you have to let them realise that you're willing to listen... you actually have to let people see that you care about them as a person as opposed to being an official.'*

### The importance of positive attitudes, ethos and authenticity

- A parent with a mobility impairment and a serious health impairment emphasised the difference good staff attitudes had made to her: *'... they've been very supportive; they've been very encouraging of anything that I've wanted to do. ... I had been sitting in the car and [teacher]'d actually come [from] the staff room to talk to*

*me in the car and how are you and how's this and how's that. They have been very positive and very friendly. I've not felt like I'm a nuisance and I haven't felt like having a disability has hindered me.'*

The Assistant Head at a school attended by the child of a parent with mental distress said: ***'the underlying ethos... rather than specific policies, seem to make the difference. Making life as rich and fruitful as possible is usually about communication and openness. You can have everything in a policy but it can stay in the filing cabinet. An ethos is 'alive' and out there and we hope it encompasses staff, students and parents and is all-encompassing for any disabilities within those groups.'***

The Head Teacher at a school attended by the child of a parent with learning disabilities said: ***'we're a big school; we have a wide spectrum of needs both in our pupils and our parents. If you can convey to parents that we're all in this together and we all want to work together for the best of the child then we're not labelling anybody or making any comments about people's ability to deal with things themselves.'***

- 'Box-ticking' is not enough. One parent with multiple mental health issues specified why his child's secondary school worked more effectively for him than the primary school: ***'They get the complexity of each individual. They realise that it's not a formulaic thing. There should be respect for everyone.... It shouldn't be a case of, it's almost like reading off a chart. In the wrong kind of format it's reading off a chart OK. It's like right, have you got a quota? Is it this way? Have you done this part? Does it fit into this bit? OK then and it doesn't work, right.'***

## Training for all staff

- Disabled parents' accounts make it clear that all staff, including janitorial, secretarial and security staff, play important roles in supporting them. Therefore, all staff are likely to benefit from training to support disabled parents' involvement.

At one school, an Assistant Head said: ***'Staff are trained on disabilities which may hinder children's learning. They have had INSETs on discrimination, including attitudes and unconscious stereotyping. This training is compulsory for staff and happens once every few years. The accessibility policy review when complete will be sent to all staff to check to make sure that they are happy with it and this approach may again help to embed good disability practice.'***

On the Disability Discrimination Act, an Assistant Head said: ***'Everybody is aware of those guidelines and what needs to be done. We are aware through staff briefings, we are also aware through our training days.'***

A classroom assistant added: ***'If we feel we need training we just ask the Head and if there's training available we go on it. I've done a speech and language course – partly it's how to help parents help their children. There's training on all the time and we get a booklet every year.'***

- Disabled parents suggest that school staff may undertake more specific disability equality training as part of their continuing professional development, including on disability-based bullying, on mental distress and the sometimes subtle impacts of impairments. A parent with mental distress said: ***'There's been a couple of times where I've been very ill and I haven't been on top of getting her a clean uniform for example. That's a horrible thing to admit, do you know what I mean but how do they deal with that? At my son's school the***

*kids lose points and get detention because they've forgotten their gym kit....'*

- Disabled parents also suggest that disability equality training and parental involvement be included in teacher education.
- Parents suggest that engaging disabled people's organisations to deliver training for school staff may be helpful.

### **Communication between staff**

- The interviews with staff at schools suggest that there is no single model for 'good staff communication' about parents who need support.

Head teachers can take different approaches – one nursery head teacher favoured informing all staff:

***'I know that a lot of people say 'oh the staff only need to know on a need-to-know basis.' I really doubt that because if you want to put a hundred percent into your work, you need to know ... what the basis of the difficulties and everything are. So when children are allocated here the key worker and myself meet with the parent or go out to the parent's home. We talk through any difficulties and straight away the parent knows that they've got me as a manager there to support them and that the key worker for their child is going to do the exact same.'***

- The evidence suggests that planning for the involvement of disabled parents helps. A head teacher said: ***'I think proactively of everybody, including the office staff, pupil support assistants, the teachers... realising that things have to be planned in advance and trying to develop a personal relationship with the parent.'***
- Some disabled parents thought that having one member of staff in a school to coordinate support for disabled parents, including disclosure and staff training, could be



a useful model.

### **‘School-wide’ children’s and parents’ awareness**

- Not only school staff but other parents and children create an inclusive environment for disabled parents. Some children had faced bullying on the basis of their parent’s impairment. One affected parent wondered whether schools ask themselves if they deal with disability-based bullying in a comparable way to racial bullying.

An Assistant Head said about her school: ***‘Children have one period of PSE a week throughout their school career, including ‘diverse lives’, and they look at disability as part of this. The school also has a good relations policy which trains children to have positive relationships with others, including how to deal with other people’s behaviour and how to deal with difference. There is training in the school that no one remains silent about bullying, however small the issue, for example red hair or stuttering.’***

- Disabled parents want disability awareness to be included in the curriculum, including awareness of mental distress.

## 5. How can schools help parents to disclose impairments?

“ Some impairments are apparent; others, such as mental distress, learning disabilities and certain medical conditions, may not be. ”

Some parents who had not disclosed an impairment felt well supported by the school's inclusive approach. Others had informally disclosed to specific staff. Other parents had formally disclosed and asked for support. Others were not sure whether their school was aware of their impairment. All these parents had good experiences of involvement. Schools are able to support some disabled parents' involvement successfully without all parents disclosing their impairment.

Finding out about impairments and support needs is not straightforward. Some impairments are apparent; others, such as mental distress, learning disabilities and certain medical conditions, may not be. Parents may have more than one impairment. Parents who identify with Deaf culture or have long-term limiting illnesses or health problems may not view themselves as 'disabled'. Some parents may view an impairment as entirely their own private business.

Disabled parents reported few specific good experiences of supportive contexts for disclosure, speaking more about the anxieties and tensions that this issue commonly provokes. They also made many suggestions of what might help.

### Current anxieties and tensions

- A small number of disabled parents in the study were happy to inform the school of an impairment: ***'[Parent] instantly came in, introduced herself... and explained some of the issues regarding her disability and some of her literacy problems as well which was great... it makes it an awful lot easier for us that we know at school what kind of support we need to put in place to help [parent] and also [child].'***

- Most disabled parents were very cautious about disclosure to the school. The reasons for this included:
  - Fear of discrimination (e.g. being treated negatively);
  - Concern about how the information might be used (e.g. the school informing social services or it being treated as a child safety issue);
  - Worry about the potential impact on their child's education (e.g. the school having lower academic expectations of the child).
- Disclosure seems to be particularly fraught for parents with mental distress: ***'Yes it's a pretty personal one isn't it? Originally it was on [child]'s Coordinated Support Plan that I had mental health problems but I asked for that to be removed because I'd rather people met me first... but I didn't like it written down.'***
- Parents felt that the burden rests strongly on them and that if they wish to disclose and ask for support they have to choose their moment and the right person.
- Parents said that a relationship of trust with the school was a necessary precursor to disclosure. An Assistant Head agreed: ***'We meet parents at induction days before the child starts and then after the start of term. We are looking at a second meeting early in the first term for new parents, offering a sociable and easy interaction if the parent wants to say anything. We try to create an atmosphere where the parent feels unthreatened and trusts the school to use information respectfully.'***
- Some schools are able to support disabled parents' involvement without the parent disclosing their impairment. A head teacher said: ***'We do have some who may have some learning difficulties but if they're not open about it, it's not something that we can ask them really. But we do try to give them oral reminders of things that***

*are happening in the school in case they're having difficulties with reading things.'*

- The impact of impairments and the support needs of parents can change. Disclosure is rarely a one-off event. Schools need to plan for this.

### **Possible future directions for disclosure good practice**

Disabled parents suggested several ways in which schools might improve the climate for disclosure:

“ **Schools could ask parents what their support needs are when they enrol their child.** ”

- Disabled parents said that they are more likely to disclose impairments if they believe that support will be provided to benefit their child's education. They are less likely to disclose simply for the purposes of a monitoring form. This suggests a way forward for schools in becoming 'disclosure-friendly'. It also implies that, if they encourage parents to disclose, schools need to have resources in place to support them.
- Parents in the study were in favour of schools being proactive in asking about parental disability, as long as schools make it clear that disclosure is voluntary and handled sensitively:
  - School information and events could make it consistently clear that the school encourages and supports all parents, including disabled parents, to be involved in their children's education;
  - Schools could ask parents what their support needs are when they enrol their child. This should avoid using 'disability' language, to which some disabled parents may not relate. It would be likely to result in the school more clearly identifying broader parental support needs, not just those related to impairments. ***'They're quite often reluctant to tell you because there can be a stigma attached but maybe when the child's being enrolled***

***if there was some way of saying to the parent is there any support that you would need as a parent? I suppose if you at least put it on the table at the initial enrolment....'***

- Schools could send a form to all parents asking how they would prefer the school to communicate with them (e.g. in writing, orally, by email) or asking if parents had any particular support needs. This could be sent out annually in the general contact information required of parents, enabling identification of both changing impairment-related support needs and newly disabled parents.
- Consideration also has to be given as to how schools pass on information about impairments to other services and authorities in a way that supports the parent, including in the transition from primary to secondary. One parent suggested: ***'From primary school when you are first registering your child if there may be something mentioned in the communication part of it and once that child moves to another primary school that information goes with your child – 'parent preferred communication method' – so that there's not any sort of miscommunication, and then it transfers with them to high school as well. It may present an opportunity for the guidance teacher or the Head Teacher to send out a letter saying we've received your child's records from primary and it states that your preferred communication is whatever, is this still the way you wish to be communicated, would you wish to come in and discuss?'***

A head teacher spoke about overcoming stigma about mental distress:

***'As I said to my staff you know a mental health problem should be looked upon as the same as German measles, the same as a broken leg, these are things that we all have the right to be helped with. I have to say at first that was kind of hard. Staff had this stigma with mental health***

*whereas now I would say a lot of our parents will come in and say I'm having a really hard time, I'm not coping really well just now, this has happened or I'm going through a bad patch mentally. The staff instantly come to the rescue and they'll say to me can we not take that child in for lunchtimes as well and it'll give that mum a wee bit more flexibility or for the breakfast club because she really was honest with us. So they've actually turned the corner probably more than me!*

## 6. Conclusion

This project underlines the right of each child to have their parents involved in their education and the right of every parent to be equally involved. The findings indicate ways in which schools can better fulfil their duties towards disabled parents.

“ *The findings indicate ways in which schools can better fulfil their duties towards disabled parents.* ”

### School: actions to enhance disabled parents' involvement

Schools need to actively work to support disabled parents to be equally involved at three levels – in their individual child's learning, in the life of the school and on representative bodies. The evidence suggests that informed attitudes, an inclusive ethos, good practices and structures can be combined to achieve these goals.

As schools become sensitised to the presence of disabled parents they need to move beyond acknowledgement to the provision of effective support.

All school staff play an important role in enabling disabled parents to be involved; therefore training needs to be provided for all staff.

The attitudes of children and other parents are also important for schools to tackle, including disability-based bullying.

Communication *within* the school about needs is vital for consistency in support.

Enabling informal communication appears to encourage disabled parents' involvement.

Having a policy on volunteering in school that gives parents as much flexibility as possible helps disabled parents get involved.



“ *The evidence suggests that disabled parents generally benefit from anticipatory adjustments such as changes to school accessibility or staff disability equality training.* ”

Disabled parents with disabled children may find formal meetings about their children’s education stressful. Schools can help to reduce this stress by keeping meetings as informal as possible, providing parents with adequate information in accessible formats and being flexible about meeting times.

Dedicated staff with a remit to liaise with all parents benefits disabled parents.

### **Disabled parents: a sensitised understanding to enhance involvement**

Schools need to think about disabled parents as a diverse group, including those with physical impairments, sensory impairments, learning disabilities and mental distress, sometimes combined. The ‘obvious’ impairment may not be the only impairment a parent has, or the impairment for which they need support.

The evidence suggests that disabled parents generally benefit from anticipatory adjustments such as changes to school accessibility or staff disability equality training. However, each disabled parent is different, and the impact of each impairment is also highly individualised. By communicating with the individual parent, schools can provide support for them.

Disabled parents are not a visible group, so schools need to find ways of knowing which parents are disabled, and which may need support beyond the anticipatory adjustments provided by the school. Disabled parents are unlikely to disclose if schools only seek this information for monitoring purposes and more likely to disclose if they know it will benefit their child’s education. Schools need to find a non-stigmatising way of asking parents if they have support needs and to ensure that if a parent says they need support to be involved, it is provided.

“ *School inspectorates need to actively monitor disabled parents’ experiences of involvement at all levels...* ”

Mental distress is particularly stigmatised. Recognising this will help schools to think about how they support parents with mental distress and minimise stress, and how they teach children and train staff about mental distress.

For parents with learning disabilities oral communication and a personal contact at the school seem especially helpful.

### **Parent representative bodies, local authorities and inspectorates: next steps to enhance disabled parents’ involvement**

Parent representative bodies could be more proactive in how they encourage and support disabled parents to be involved.

Local authorities need to consider how schools are informed, supported, resourced, trained and monitored in relation to disabled parents’ involvement.

Local authorities should consider disabled parents’ involvement as part of their assessment of school performance in relation to the Disability Equality Duty.

School inspectorates need to actively monitor disabled parents’ experiences of involvement at all levels – the individual child’s learning, in the life of the school, and in representative bodies.

## Resources

Department of Education Northern Ireland: Information for parents [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils\\_parents-pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils_parents-pg.htm)

Direct.gov: Information for Disabled Parents <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/Disabledparents/index.htm>

DPN: Disabled Parents Network <http://www.disabledparentsnetwork.org.uk/>

DPPI: Disability Pregnancy and Parenthood International <http://www.dppi.org.uk>

Mind: For better mental health <http://www.mind.org.uk>

ODI: Office for Disability Issues <http://www.odi.gov.uk/iod/top-tips/toptips06.php>

Parentzone: Information about education in Scotland to help parents support their children's learning <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentzone/>

Parentscentre: Information and support for parents on how to help with your child's learning <http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk>

People First: A national self-advocacy organisation of people with learning difficulties <http://www.peoplefirstltd.com/>

RNIB guidance on producing accessible reports, materials and communication: [http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicWebsite/public\\_seeitright.hcsp](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicWebsite/public_seeitright.hcsp)

Welsh Assembly Government: Information for parents <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/parents/>



CfBT Education Trust  
60 Queens Road  
Reading  
Berkshire  
RG1 4BS

0118 902 1000  
[www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com)