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Conclusions

- Disabled parents are not a visible group: therefore, consideration has to be given to ways of identifying them. Schools need to find a non-stigmatising way of asking parents about their support needs. Disabled parents are more likely to tell schools about their impairment if they believe it will lead to support that will benefit their child's education.
- All home-school communications to parents should be in formats that are accessible to them individually and all staff involved with a disabled parent should be aware of his/her communication support needs.
- Schools that present an informal, flexible and accessible atmosphere facilitate the involvement of disabled parents. Parents with learning disabilities and those experiencing mental distress particularly welcome oral communication and a personal contact at the school.
- Disabled parents of children with additional support needs often find formal meetings about their children's education very stressful. Schools can minimise this pressure by keeping meetings as informal as possible, providing parents with adequate information in accessible formats and being flexible about meeting times.
- While disabled parents benefit from anticipatory adjustments, their individual circumstances differ. Schools can provide the right initial support by communicating with the individual parent and can then plan how to anticipate and address future barriers.
- Disability awareness training for school communities, including input for pupils, was identified as the best way of overcoming attitudinal barriers experienced

by disabled people, particularly those with mental distress. It was recommended that disability organisations be involved in delivering the training not only for school communities but also for initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) courses.

- Having staff with specific responsibility for parental involvement staff enhances disabled parents' involvement.

Other publications

This research report is one part of a set of four publications resulting from this research. A guidance document for schools, a research report and an accessible summary are also available at www.cfbt.com.

This leaflet is available in other formats on request. Contact research@cfbt.com



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SUMMARY

Disabled parents' involvement in their children's education: an examination of good practice

Summary for parents

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About the research

This leaflet sets out the main findings from research about disabled parents' involvement in their children's education. The research, completed in August 2009, was conducted by a team from Strathclyde University.

Children do better at school when their parents are involved in their education. Supporting parents' participation is a key aim of education policy throughout the UK. Earlier research has shown that disabled parents face a number of barriers to involvement in their children's education. This study focused on examples of good practice in order to produce guidance for schools. It aimed:

- 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
- To identify factors which help promote good professional practice in this area, what impedes the process and how any barriers can be reduced.

The study began with reviews of UK-wide policy and research relating to parental involvement in education, with a particular focus on disabled parents. Interviews were carried out with senior staff in the voluntary and statutory sectors, including government, working on parental involvement. Case studies were conducted with 23 disabled parents and one grandparent who had positive experiences of being involved in their children's education. These 19 mothers, four fathers and one grandmother had a range of impairments, including learning disabilities and mental distress, and

lived in Scotland or northern England. The researchers also spoke to six professionals within schools or local authorities who were able to shed further light on the good practice initiatives identified by parents.

Findings

- While legal frameworks, policy initiatives and arrangements for parental involvement vary across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the role of parents has become increasingly prioritised in education policy throughout Britain since the 1990s.
- Parental involvement is promoted throughout the four jurisdictions, with differing emphasis, in three ways – in their own child's learning, in the life of the school and on formal representative bodies.
- Parental involvement legislation applies to all parents. Although it makes no specific reference to disabled parents, it has to be implemented in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005. This means disabled parents must be treated equally to other parents. There is support from policymakers and practitioners for more specific guidance to ensure disabled parents' involvement. It was suggested that consideration be given to ways in which schools can identify disabled parents and the interface between disability, parental involvement and inclusive education legislation.
- While there are currently no mechanisms for monitoring disabled parents' involvement, the increasing profile of parental involvement in inspection processes throughout the UK, at both national and local authority level, coupled with authorities' and agencies' own obligations under the DDA, provide a timely opportunity for action.

- Disabled parents viewed involvement in their children's education as very important and beneficial for their children. A diverse group, their involvement in their own child's learning, the life of the school and representation on formal bodies varied in nature and intensity. It was suggested that involvement may be more important for disabled than non-disabled parents because the former sometimes lack opportunities to participate in the social life of their communities.
- Disabled parents' involvement was supported in three distinct ways – by anticipatory adjustments, mostly related to making school buildings accessible, by individual adjustments which addressed their own particular needs and through generic support for all parents, e.g. pupil, parent and family support groups, homework clubs, parent liaison staff and external agencies. An inclusive school ethos and good communication practices are key factors in facilitating involvement.
- The current onus on parents to disclose impairment causes stress to many. Parents wanted disclosure made easier and suggested that schools become 'disclosure friendly' by emphasising that they welcome and support all parents, specifically including disabled parents.

Our study shows that an inclusive ethos, a supportive and accessible head teacher, appropriate generic support and flexible structures coupled with positive and informed attitudes promote the equal involvement of disabled parents. The following conclusions highlight the key issues to be addressed by policymakers and practitioners to better support disabled parents.