

# Parents' views of and involvement with the Scottish Education System

A research report contributing to the National Education Debate  
prepared by Carole Millar Research on behalf of the Scottish  
Consumer Council and the Scottish Parenting Forum



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# Executive summary

## INTRODUCTION

This study examines target groups of parents' views of education in Scotland. The study focuses on those parents who have experienced some disadvantage or discrimination due to factors such as coming from an ethnic minority background, low income or living in a part of Scotland that is geographically remote. The aim was to identify parents' views of the current education system with particular emphasis on how parents interact with the system and how this might be improved. Six focus groups were undertaken across Scotland between 5th and 19th June 2002.

The study was commissioned by The Scottish Consumer Council and the Scottish Parenting Forum. Funding was provided by the Scottish Executive and the findings will contribute to the National Debate on Education.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Parents' educational experiences - comparing now and then**

Many parents expressed a negative perception of their own education. They saw their children's education as being different from their own but many viewed their children's experiences as worse than their own. Some positive changes were however acknowledged, including improved teaching methods, more classroom assistants and playground supervisors, greater use of computers and more encouragement for parents to be involved. However issues of bullying still prevailed in schools today and discipline was thought to be worse. Some parents felt there was increased pressure for children at school and there were fewer jobs and opportunities for those children who were not academic and left

without qualifications.

### **Parental perceptions of the current system**

There were a number of key themes expressed by parents about the current system. Firstly, the individuality of the way that their children learn was not sufficiently recognised by teachers. All children have different strengths and parents queried the extent to which this was catered for within the existing arrangements. The current focus on academic subjects and pressure to pass exams could have the effect of making some children feel excluded. Some parents were critical of the school for the teachers' attitudes or for not giving sufficient encouragement to their children. Accessing specialist support for those children who parents felt were falling behind was often a difficult protracted process, or it was felt provided at too late a stage in the child's education.

The second key theme was children's behaviour and discipline. There was a sense that children's behaviour was more difficult to handle today. Parents are often at a loss themselves as to how to encourage their children to behave in an acceptable manner and look to teachers for guidance. Whilst keen to have improved discipline in schools, many were in practice critical of overly harsh schemes especially when applied to very young children. There was also a feeling that children could be excluded from schools too easily.

Bullying remains a big issue and was reported to be particularly prevalent at secondary school level. The transition from primary to secondary was a difficult time largely due to this problem. Parents again looked to schools to quickly resolve problems of bullying but currently schools were seen to handle this poorly.

Finally it was noted that the school day finishing at 3.00pm was a problem for many working parents who would like to see after-school activities offered such that their child's time was productively engaged until the end of the typical working day. Access to extra curricular classes outwith schools was often restricted due to the costs involved.

### **Parental interaction with the education system**

Parents' typically made contact with schools, outwith scheduled events, only when they have a problem. Problems tended to centre on one of the main issues raised above such as bullying, behaviour, or problems with learning.

Several barriers were identified to some parents making contact with their child's school. Some parents were unsure when it was appropriate to make contact. Other parents found the school environment to be intimidating and unfriendly. Others said it was not worthwhile contacting because nothing happened as a result of a previous contact. Teachers in secondary schools were more difficult to get in touch with than those at primary schools.

Those parents who had attended parenting courses or assertiveness courses felt that this had helped them feel more comfortable making contact.

Once contact had been made parents identified communication problems. Parents were unsure whether teachers really listened to them or their children in some instances. This could inhibit parents' willingness to get in touch in future. Communication was also hindered by the language that was used and plain English was preferred without being patronising. Those from an ethnic minority had different language difficulties, needed an interpreter and would prefer written

communications to be translated.

There were mixed views about how well informed parents were concerning their child's progress. Some felt very well informed but some would have liked more information. Some criticised teachers for not providing full information about their child's progress, generally adding a positive spin and telling them what they thought parents wanted to hear. They would prefer more honesty.

Parents welcomed the idea of having the option of an advocacy service to help them discuss and deal with issues with the school.

### **Making complaints**

Although many parents had had some problem with the school only a few had ever made a complaint. Some felt reluctance to complain for fear of repercussions for their child and knowledge of complaints procedures was poor. They felt that complaints were discouraged and schools often told parents that they would sort out the problem. Often this did not happen, causing the difficulties to increase. Parents would prefer a prompter approach to resolving difficulties. Some parents expressed that teachers' attitudes could also exacerbate problems. Parents expected teachers to take a professional approach and not let personalities get in the way. Parents also expected teachers to respect their pupils' privacy and keep problems confidential where possible and not shout at or blame children unfairly.

Whilst clear discipline policies were welcomed they did not always approve of school exclusion, which was sometimes viewed as an inappropriate punishment. Parents would like to be consulted more about discipline policies in schools.

There were mixed views as to whether schools were keen to learn from the problems that parents might have and there were a number of suggestions to encourage parents to make their views known. These included complaints / suggestion boxes, an improved attitude from teachers, support from a mediator and opportunities for more informal contact with schools and teachers.

### **Information and support**

Parent Teachers' Associations and Schools Boards, which may be one source a parent could use to raise issues about problems in school, were not seen as an option many parents in these groups would use, being perceived as unrepresentative of parents generally.

Few knew of anywhere they could go to get independent advice and they strongly supported the idea of having such a service. The partnership between schools and parents was seen as a very unbalanced relationship at present and a source of independent advice might help redress this imbalance.

Parents also welcomed the option of accessing training to help their children with homework and deal with their children's personal problems at school. Parents advocated a counselling service to be available within schools to help their children cope with the problems that school can bring to them. The guidance system was not thought to be sufficient due to the other teaching duties and lack of independence. Others advocated personal development courses or assertiveness courses for the children.

## **Involving parents**

There was awareness that increasing efforts were now being made to involve parents to a much greater extent. Whilst there was an interest in being consulted about school policies, few parents stated that they would wish active involvement in the development of those policies. Similarly, there was little interest in being involved in the development of policy at a local authority or national level by participants, although there was interest in being consulted over policies such as school closures. This suggests that parents are interested in being involved in issues they view as being directly relevant to their own lives. On the wider issue of mechanisms for representing parents' views locally and nationally, few parents felt there was a good system in place.

## **IDEAS FOR CHANGE**

In summary, the main improvements parents would like to see for change included:

### **For schools and local authorities**

- Improved discipline policies developed in consultation with parents
- Consideration of return to uniforms
- Support for class room assistants
- Improved support for learning, including dealing with learning difficulties at an early stage
- Appropriate encouragement and recognition of children's non-academic as well as academic efforts
- A more proactive approach to getting feedback from parents including making complaints process clearer
- Developing involvement activities which are more directly relevant to real lives and areas of interest.

**For parents**

- The option of training for parents including
  - Parenting courses
  - Shared learning to enable parents to help children with homework
  - Self development courses
  - Assertiveness courses
- Provision of independent advice for parents about their child's education
- Option of accessing mediation or advocacy service.

**For children**

- Support for pupils including
  - Self development courses
  - Independent, confidential counselling available in schools
- Provision of more homework clubs and other after school activities.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

The Scottish Executive has initiated a national debate on the future of school education in Scotland. This is a very wide ranging debate seeking views from the diversity of Scottish opinion across all aspects of Scottish education.

The Scottish Consumer Council<sup>1</sup> with its specific remit to promote the interests of disadvantaged consumers, together with the Scottish Parenting Forum, a community funded organisation managed by Children in Scotland have commissioned Carole Millar Research to examine target groups of parents' views of education. This project placed a particular emphasis on how parents are involved with the existing education system, what problems they face in interacting with schools and how this might be improved. The Scottish Executive provided funding to undertake this study.

## 1.1 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to focus on those parents who might have experienced some disadvantage or discrimination due to factors such as being on a low income, coming from an ethnic minority background or living in a part of Scotland that is geographically remote.

The aims of the research were:

- To access and provide qualitative information about targeted groups of parents' views on the current education system.
- To explore the nature of and levels of parental interaction and involvement with the education system at a school and local authority level.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1 gives details about the Scottish Consumer Council and the Scottish Parenting Forum.

- To seek parents views on the effectiveness of the 'home-school partnership' and ways to improve this through access to training and information.
- To gain perspectives from parents on how their views are, or could be represented in developing education policy.
- To enable the participation of groups of parents who, for whatever reasons, would not normally participate in Scottish Executive consultation exercises.

## **1.2 METHODOLOGY**

Six focus groups were undertaken at the following geographical locations:

- Muirhouse, Edinburgh
- Bellshill
- Paisley
- Methil, Fife
- Stranraer
- Alness

The recruitment of the focus groups was undertaken by the Scottish Parenting Forum drawing upon their information exchange database. Participants were drawn from existing groups and the focus groups typically took place at one of their normal meeting times. As a result of this approach, the group composition was heavily biased towards women with only two men participating across all six groups, reflecting the relative prominence of women within interest groups of this nature. About half of the participants had children who were at or who had recently completed secondary school education.

The group recruitment succeeded in providing representation from parents who might have been on a low income, came from an ethnic minority background or lived in a part of Scotland that is geographically remote.

The projects with which the study worked were:

- The Parents for Change Project, Bellshill.
- The Black Community Development Project, Muirhouse, Edinburgh.
- Family Matters Outreach Project supported by Barnardos, Methil, Fife.
- Parents as Educators Project, Paisley.
- A Family Learning Project group supported by Building Healthy Communities Initiative, Dumfries and Galloway
- Home-Start, Alness, Ross and Cromarty

Further details of the projects are provided in Appendix 2.

Focus groups were undertaken between the dates of 5th and 19th June 2002. A topic guide had been prepared which identified the broad areas for discussion. However the groups were free to discuss the issues that were important and relevant to them under the broad context of levels of interaction and involvement as parents within the education system. Each discussion lasted one and a half hours.

The parents at four focus groups were shown the video prepared by the Scottish Executive as an introduction to the Education Debate. This was not available in Chinese and so was not shown at the Cantonese speaking group (Muirhouse, Edinburgh) although copies of the Scottish Executive's information pack in Cantonese outlining the purpose of the debate and means of contributing were instead circulated in advance of the meeting.<sup>2</sup>

All group discussions were audio-taped to allow for transcripts to be prepared. In addition a scribe from either the Scottish Parenting Forum or the Scottish Consumer Council attended each meeting and prepared fieldnotes of the discussion. The combination of fieldnotes and transcripts form the basis of material for analysis.

Whilst the parents who participated in the focus groups could not be described as 'typical' parents, they provide an insight into the issues faced by those parents who for one reason or another might be experiencing difficulties with the system and who would not usually have another means of expressing their views on the education system.

By focussing on those who do experience disadvantage of one form or another we can highlight those aspects of the education service which may contribute to the sense of exclusion.

### **1.3 STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT**

Chapter 2 examines parental perceptions of the education system starting with their experiences of their own education and comparing this with their views of their children's education, looking at both the positive and negative features of the current system. It then examines whether it is easier or more difficult for children to learn today.

<sup>2</sup> The video was not shown at the Fife group as a functioning video machine was unavailable.

Chapter 3 then provides an overview of the main problems of the current system identified by the parents.

Chapter 4 examines the process of parental interaction with the education system including the reasons for getting in touch, parental knowledge of complaints procedures and what they can do if they have a problem. Finally this chapter discussed the extent to which parents feel schools are keen to learn from the problems they may have.

Chapter 5 looks at parents' views in relation to communication with schools, including the ease with which parents can talk to teachers and teachers listen to what they have to say. It also covers the type of language used and examines use and types of written communication.

Chapter 6 examines parents' knowledge of where to go for advice and information and the demand for independent sources of advice and training for parents.

Chapter 7 examines current level of involvement with schools including Parent Teacher Associations and School Boards as well as involvement with local authorities. Finally it discusses how parents might become more involved.

The final chapter aims to pull together the main findings from the report and highlights examples of good practice or suggestions that were made in the course of the discussions as to how the education system might be improved.

Quotes are provided throughout this report to illustrate the points made. To protect the confidentiality of participants no indication is provided of which groups the quotes are from. The quotes are taken from the transcripts of all six groups.

As with any qualitative research study, it should be noted that the findings aim to represent the range of views presented within the course of the discussions. It might be argued that since these groups were recruited specifically to represent parents who might have experienced some disadvantage, they are not providing a true picture of the state of Scottish education. However there were enough common themes amongst all of the groups to give a robust guide to the problems that this particular body of parents faces and to their priorities for improvement. It cannot provide a measure of the number of people holding a view or the strength of conviction with which each view is held. Where it is possible to do so however, some indication as to where the balance of opinion appears to lie is provided.

# Chapter 2 Parental perceptions of the education system

## 2.1 PARENTAL RECOLLECTION OF THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATION

Parents' perceptions of their own experiences of education were mixed, but many who attended these group discussions had had a poor experience.

Those who had negative experiences of their own education listed a number of contributory factors. They were:

- Bullying
- Fear
- Not being listened to
- Being put into a strange and threatening environment
- Prejudice

There was no instance of a parent criticising their own education due to the curriculum or choice of subjects.

Bullying was the main factor highlighted by parents that contributed to a poor experience at school. This was particularly difficult at secondary school and some parents can recall going to a place where there were many more children in a new and uncomfortable environment which compounded the problem.

*“It was fighting every day because when you are wee you get picked on so I think that is...you can't concentrate on your education when you are getting that done to you.”*

Fear was also mentioned in a couple of groups. There was, of course, fear of other children as described above, but there was also fear of teachers. One said she was frightened to say anything to teachers for fear of

*“You couldn't ever go to the teacher with a problem or they... probably you weren't listened to but you were too frightened to ever approach the teacher in any way.”*

*“We were frightened to say anything to the teachers because we would get the belt.”*

On the positive side, they felt that their teachers were treated with more respect than teachers are now and there were fewer discipline issues than currently.

One group mentioned that there was much more prejudice about children with disability in their days at school when they were segregated from other children.

## **2.2 PARENTS' VIEWS OF THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION**

Behaviour and discipline are the two main areas where parents felt there has been a significant shift since their days at school. Some children today were seen by some parents as out of control, lacking respect for teachers and adults in general and schools as not doing enough to maintain discipline. Despite the negative effect of corporal punishment on some parents' own experience of education, there remain a few who advocate returning to this means of disciplining children. Exclusion was perceived not to work as a means of disciplining a child.

*“...there's no discipline at all in that high school, the kids run the riot act, there's no compulsory uniforms, which causes more stigma...”*

*“It was a lot better than it is now. You treated the teacher with respect. We did get on with our work a lot better. Now the teacher is told to*

In particular, some schools were perceived to handle incidents of bullying very poorly and this was an issue that continues to plague some children's lives and can contribute greatly to problems within the family.

Some parents expressed views about selectively involving parents within schools.

*"...sometimes teachers' attitudes don't help. You know, when there's school trips, they single out certain middle class parents "Would you come and help out on this trip?" And when there are invitations for events in the schools, again it's heavily dominated by better off parents."*

Parents also stated that there was a stigma attached to those families who did not have enough money to conform to the dress code set for schools by their peers. This supported the argument by some to return to having school uniforms where all children would be equal. Not all schools have such a poor record and it was recognised that there are some schools where a uniform is encouraged and discipline is more controlled. Uniform and discipline were linked in the eyes of certain parents.

*"Nowadays they're not into their school uniforms, it's all the (designer) make."*

There was felt to be an increasing emphasis on academic subjects at the expense of vocational subjects. There was also less after-school sport activity in schools than there was when many of the parents were at school.

*"I mean I remember when I was there and the teachers went on strike, so that all stopped and it never started again in my life-time at school, but I don't know if it has again."*

Finally, some teachers were thought not to give their children the encouragement they needed. Indeed, some parents expressed the view that certain individual teachers were positively destructive to the child's self esteem. Some children were labelled by a teacher and parents felt that this could contribute to the child giving up as once they have the label of being 'a trouble maker', 'lazy 'or whatever, they see little point in trying to improve. This teacher attitude can then, not only be counter productive to improving the child's behaviour, but also damages the environment for the rest of the class.

*"They are labelled with this "I'm like that and I might as well act like that type thing."*

*"My boy's really bright and I'm worried that when he goes to school that he's going to get bored and he's going to disrupt the classroom and then he's going to get labelled as a bad child and he won't get the education that he needs because he's been labelled as a disruptive child."*

In summary parents views on the main negative aspects of current educational provision and the changes since they were at school were:

- Children are cheekier/nastier
- Discipline is significantly poorer
- Children have less respect for teachers and adults generally
- Concern about children's opportunity for interpersonal interaction
- Stigma attached to children of lone parents
- More difficult to get jobs without qualifications
- Teachers don't give encouragement to those who need it
- Lack of compulsory uniforms
- Lack of individual attention for the child and excessively large class sizes

- Children being labelled
- Insufficient prominence of vocational subjects

There were however some positive changes acknowledged. They recognised that there were many teaching methods that were different from their own education (though this could make it difficult for them to help their children with their homework). There was also a greater choice of subjects on offer than when they were at school.

Despite the criticisms from some parents of teachers' lack of encouragement, some parents did feel that the teachers were more in tune with how young people are thinking today. Throughout the course of the discussions there was a clear preference for the younger teachers' methods and criticism of those longer serving teachers who may have hung onto older, more rigid and stricter teaching methods. This was an interesting contradiction in that many parents sought a greater degree of control over their children's behaviour but they did not like strict discipline procedures being applied especially to very young children.

*"I think teachers are having to learn that they have to show the respect to gain the respect and I think that's one of the issues. I think yeah, children in the schools are having more voice, but I feel that the training should come for the teachers, to encourage them to have respect, to realise that these children are entitled to some form of voice, or entitled to some sort of opinion."*

The introduction of classroom assistants and playground supervisors was thought to be a beneficial change. Despite continued concerns about bullying still prevailing in some schools, playground supervision in particular was seen as one way of reducing the incidence of this, especially amongst the younger children.

The use of computers and technology in general was also mentioned as a major shift in the way that children learn. However there were concerns that the social interaction of playing games etc was being lost to the child and that their social development could be compromised by the current focus on computers.

*“It is getting the balance between using the computer and having the social skills and interacting with other people is very important to build up your own boundaries. Children should learn what it is like to socialise and you can't learn that from a computer.”*

There was now more parental involvement. This was a notable change as in their day parents were asked not to help with their child's work and were expected to keep at arms length and leave education to the teachers. Parents are now more likely to get involved, again particularly in the early stages.

*“I'd say now there's more parental involvement. There really is. I know that I've got a good involvement with the school and they can contact me about anything and if I've got a worry I can go to the teacher or the head-teacher.”*

In summary the more positive changes were:

- Different teaching methods
- Teachers are now more in tune with children
- Introduction of classroom assistants, playground supervisors
- Use of computers
- More parental involvement

The Chinese parents had mostly been educated in Hong Kong and it was difficult for them to compare their educational experience to that of their children. In Hong Kong there was much competition, a lot of homework and a lot of stress for the children. Education here is seen as being more relaxed and offering a wider range of subjects including subjects such as music and drama and not being confined to those subjects or skills that can help them earn money as adults.

*'It seems that the students are very relaxed. They do not have much homework to do, comparing to those in Hong Kong. For the students themselves, it is good because they are not stressed. From the parents' point of view, I am worried in case they do not learn enough and lose their competitiveness.'*

On balance there were more negative perceptions of schools today than positive although many of the positive changes were significant ones and many of the negative perceptions were inter-related focussing on issues of behaviour, discipline and the child feeling excluded from the system.

One group, on seeing the introductory video on the education debate emphasised that the image portrayed in the video of children at school bore no resemblance to their own children's school experience, which was less calm and ordered.

### **2.3 EASIER OR MORE DIFFICULT FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN TODAY**

The majority of parents felt that it was more difficult for children to learn today.

The main reason given was that the children are now under a great amount of pressure from schools and to a certain extent from society in

general to perform. It was not easy to get jobs and there was an element of competition to do well.

*"More difficult, the pressures on them are unbelievable."*

*"...there is a lot of pressure on the schools but I think that if, as a parent, you can be quite involved with the school, I think you can alleviate that bit of pressure with discussion."*

One comment was that children received insufficient encouragement and instead are always being told that they can do better. The consequences of this pressure can be devastating as the child enters secondary school including the child resorting to drink or drugs and in a few instances even to attempt suicide.

*"They've got to accept that they are trying."*

*"The effect, I get that "I don't want to go today", and what have you."*

*"....she's just not grasped a certain thing that they're doing and apparently the teacher who's been shouting and bawling at her 'cause she gets it wrong. And I didn't know this, I only found out the other day and I said "You know, why was she shouting?" "I had the wrong answer."*

A few parents have experience of their children not wanting to go to school, which they attribute to the pressure that they feel they are under. One woman described how her son has become ill because of this and she lacks support to do anything about this.

Parents talk about this pressure starting very early and they feel that their children get a lot more homework than they used to get. Schools are often very critical of children and sometimes this criticism can start a very early age. For some parents, this was too young to be expressing criticism of their performance. One example was given of a five-year-old being criticised for not joining in enough at circle time.

Teachers are thought to be increasing the pressure they put on pupils due to their focus on league tables and examination passes. One group acknowledged the teachers themselves were facing increasing pressures of their own. Continuous assessment was seen by one group as better or alternatively exams could be staggered and not all undertaken at the one time of year.

*"I'm not excusing them but the teachers don't have time for them because they have got that many kids and they've got to meet these deadlines for things."*

*"Because they've got league tables now haven't they? They have got to meet these league tables so they are not going to concentrate on these kids that are a bit slower."*

In addition to the pressure exerted on them by schools, the children face additional pressure from their peers in their teenage years. One group felt that some of this pressure could be alleviated by discussion and involvement from parents with all parties. However it was another view that schools would not listen.

## **2.4 CHILDREN LEARNING ELSEWHERE**

Children do learn in places other than schools and parents acknowledged that home was one source of learning.

*“My laddie is fourteen and he can weld to MOT standard and he can change a tyre.”*

One group recognising the increase in the level of parental involvement felt that the input from home could make a significant difference. Some parents who had themselves attended courses to assist them help their children at home found this especially valuable. Others recognised their own difficulties in assisting their children at home.

Other places where children learn include youth clubs, and classes for subjects such as dancing, swimming etc. Children of Chinese parents will commonly attend classes in Cantonese at the weekends. However the availability of facilities such as youth groups was seen as inadequate in some of the more deprived areas. Either they did not exist at all or were only geared to certain age groups with those over 14 or under 8 often having no or limited provision. Access to such classes or access to leisure facilities such as swimming pools can be limited by income levels and some parents felt that they can get expensive.

Children were also seen to learn “on the street”.

One group spoke positively about a homework club which was available in the evenings and which allows the children to access computers. Another similar club was run as an after school activity but the children were selected to go to this club and it is not available to all. This type of initiative was very welcomed since there was a perceived lack of youth or sports clubs. There was a wish for the availability to be extended.

Computers were also mentioned as a learning resource, but not all households have access to one. TV was also mentioned as a source of learning.

One group stressed the need for children to have time outwith structured activities simply to play and have fun. The development of social skills was thought to be important and children need to learn these by being within groups of other children.

# Chapter 3      Key problems with the current system

When asked if there needs to be changes in the way that children learn, parents tended to highlight the barriers to or problems with the way that their children currently learn as well as identifying some solutions. This chapter outlines some of these problems.

## **3.1      RECOGNISING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS**

It is evident to parents that children all learn at a different pace. Those that cannot keep up with the pace that the class is learning at can get pushed aside and the momentum is lost. They felt that schools are failing to cope with the diversity of abilities and ways that different children learn. This was a common theme although it was often expressed in different ways. Another group wanted children who have fallen behind to be given more help and examination of the reasons why some children fall behind.

Some thought that children needed more support as soon as it was evident that this was happening but their experience was that this help was not easily forthcoming and they have to fight to access this level of support.

There was a need to recognise that all children are different and that one will have skills in one area and another in something else. It was not good that maths and English were prized to the exclusion of all else, for example sports. Parents felt it was important that children were not put down because they were not academic.

## **3.2      TIMING OF THE SCHOOL DAY AND WORKING PARENTS**

The school day typically finishes around 3.00pm and this presented difficulties for many working parents. Some felt that more could be

provided to ensure that this time at the end of the day was used more constructively. Homework clubs were one option that was discussed. Sports or arts clubs could also be offered.

*“Also as a working parent, finishing at three o'clock is hell, absolute hell. So if these clubs are there that keep them going till five makes all the difference between working and not.”*

### **3.3 DISCIPLINE**

Despite pleas for additional discipline measures in schools, there were examples of very harsh discipline being meted out to very young children much to the distress of the child and their parents.

Five year olds were being disciplined in one school by having to stand and face the wall for large parts of the day, another made a five year old sit outside the classroom. Another young child was told that his soiling was unacceptable behaviour. These measures were seen by parents as unhelpful and even harmful and they wanted help for their children. This was often unavailable due to lack of resources.

When discipline of this nature was applied to very young children some parents found it very distressing and did not know how to handle the situation to improve matters.

*“Her 5 year old is in primary 1 at the moment and he is being disciplined and being turned to face the wall for most of the time. She is finding this very upsetting and she has challenged the school on this issue and asked for one to one for her child and they have said that there wasn't enough resources for that and this would have to continue. They don't help the children who really need the help.”*

There was little support for exclusion policies, which was not seen as an appropriate punishment for the child and in one instance more like a holiday. It was also felt to be too easy to exclude a child from school.

*"...because the kids nowadays, they're all "Alright, we're goin' to do this, we're no' goin' to get the belt, we're gonna get expelled."*

*"He came down the corridor 'cause he was excluded once and it was for - like empty plastic bottle and he got excluded, because it hurt another pupil further along. But he never done it anticipating "I'm goin' to hit this kid". The way he kicked it, it missed the kind of path it was going and he got excluded and I thought it's far too easy, 'cause he loved it, big smiles and whatever else, "I'm no' at school the morrow" and it worked against the school kind of thing, whereas they should've kept him in the school and maybe gave him detention after school for it. But I think they do it far too easily, it's an easy option, just to exclude them."*

Two groups described discipline procedures that had been introduced in their schools. One group described a discipline procedure that had recently been introduced called "skating on thin ice". This is an escalating procedure whereby the children get so many points before a letter is sent home to their parents. This continues to a yellow card and finally a red card. Parents felt they were involved in the process at too late a stage.

Whilst parents feel it is good to have some kind of procedure, one criticism of this scheme is that once on the scale it is difficult for the children to come off during that term. Parents were not at all involved in the setting up of this procedure and some would have liked to be. Parents have concerns about how petty misdemeanours have to be to qualify for a punishment under this scheme.

In another area, a zero tolerance scheme linked to a code of conduct has been introduced as a discipline procedure. Parents spoke of the difficulties of using detentions as a deterrent when they lived in rural areas and the child was dependent on catching the school bus home. Detentions over lunch and break times could substitute.

Parents were generally keen on the new approaches to tackling discipline and the two schemes described were approved of although there was a lack of consultation with the parents about them.

*“Although we're sort of horrified at what she [head teacher] came up with and part of me thought it was quite a good thing, 'cause she had to set some kind of boundaries, you know. Maybe it was a wee bit more severe than we thought, we would've liked, but I think it's working from what I hear.”*

Parents whose children are very dependent on school transport were also pleased to see that supervision is now being provided on the buses and this scheme is being hailed as a success at improving behavioural problems here.

### **3.4 DEALING WITH BULLYING**

Another major reason why some children find it more difficult to learn today is the environment within which they are learning in which bullying or the threat of bullying plays a major part.

Bullying was not just the physical abuse that some suffer but also verbal abuse. Some children get to the stage where they do not want to attend school. It was also thought to be emotionally very damaging to the child. Despite the very serious consequences of bullying many schools were described as doing nothing about the problem or as being very

slow in dealing with it. Parents find this situation very difficult to accept.

*“See people tend to think that bullying is all about “C'm'ere you and I'll gie you a black eye” sort of thing. It's mental torture.”*

In one of the rural areas, one parent described how there were no alternatives available for her daughter, as there were no other secondary schools in her area. Lack of choice led one child's parents to make a significant life change to avoid the problem and one parent moved to another town because a bullying issue had not been resolved to her satisfaction. This is not however an option that many would even consider.

### **3.5 TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOLING**

The transition between primary and secondary school was mentioned in a number of groups as a time of some difficulty for young people. One suggestion to alleviate this problem was the introduction of a school, which caters only for S1 and S2 year groups. This would allow the children to make an easier transition without being thrown in with so many other children and some of the consequent bullying etc.

*“That's where if they had a middle school, before the high school.”*

### **3.6 TEACHERS' ATTITUDES**

A number of parents also mentioned the way that teachers treat their children was another important factor to how their children learn. Some teachers were sarcastic about a child in front of the rest of the class or would speak about them within earshot of the child, which was deemed by parents to be unhelpful and can exacerbate bullying situations outside

of the classroom. One group felt that a few teachers were not being good enough role models for their children.

There were examples given of teachers speaking of personal issues in front of a class or of teachers carrying a perception of a sibling onto another child

*"The following day he's in the class, the big guidance teacher comes in and "Oh I got a letter fi' your mammy xxx, runnin' back to your mammy were you 'cause you got a puni" [punishment exercise] in front of all the class. No way, I was on the phone then "Wait a minute, you're out of order"."*

*"My son was dragged out of the hallway into the playground and his teacher left the door open and all the kids heard her saying you smell you should be having a bath. She should be saying it quieter or taking him out and closing the door."*

*"My daughter is 13 slits her wrists and one of the teachers actually told the whole class that my daughter done this and she has never done it for months but after a couple of things that have happened she felt like doing it again."*

When a teacher is running down your child, one parent said it took confidence to challenge them.

There was also a tendency expressed by one group of teachers blaming the home environment for some children's difficulties. Some parents felt that some of their child's problems were outwith their control and would like help to resolve them and not blame.

Teachers were seen by some parents as having favourites and it was a problem if the teacher took a dislike to your child. There was a view expressed that teachers should be more professional and not be influenced by personalities.

*“If a teacher takes a dislike to that child, they are powerless. That is that whole year of the child's education messed up because they don't get on with that teacher.”*

*“If you go in to complain they will tell you that you can't move your child. They will pull ranks.”*

*“The teachers should be more professional to rise above that personality thing.”*

One group commented that teachers need to talk to pupils rather than shout at them and this might result in fewer areas of conflict. Another group echoed this by saying that some teachers don't listen properly to their pupils allowing some problems to escalate.

*“I took her up the school. The teacher, you know, the teacher says “It's alright, we'll deal with it”. I says “No, I was on to the police”. “Oh there's no need to do that Mrs xxx, no need to do that”. And then three weeks after, 'cause my wean retaliated back, my wean was expelled.”*

Examples of this in other groups included some children who were caught up in some dispute between pupils and retaliating and being blamed, sometimes unfairly and the teacher making little effort to understand the details of any incident.

Some parents felt that some problems arose or were worsened due to the teacher's attitude to the problem and this was an area where parents felt there could be improvement with a different attitude from teachers.

One group thought that secondary teachers must have received little training on child development because their period of teacher training would have been much shorter than that for primary teachers. Good training for secondary teachers was therefore thought to be an important factor in improving their attitude to their pupils. Interestingly, some of the pupils who leave school at the earliest opportunity do in fact want to continue their education and parents described relationships between teachers and students much improved in colleges where they were treated much more as adults.

### **3.7 LACK OF CHOICE**

Few parents felt that they had much choice about the education that their child receives in relation to choice of school in particular but also in relation to aspects of choice and balance within the curriculum and access to specialist support for children with additional needs.

#### **3.7.1 Choice of school**

There was limited choice of schools for some but in reality this was difficult. In rural areas there was very limited or no choice since there was usually only one secondary school for the area. Where there was a choice of another school, transport became an issue as transport would only be provided to the catchment area school and parents would have to organise and fund transport to another school. This effectively ruled it the option out for many.

*“If you're not well off, how are you going to get your child from here to, you know, somewhere five miles away?”*

There was more choice of school available at nursery and primary stages of their child's education.

### **3.7.2 Choice of subjects**

There was no choice of subjects at primary level. Some parents felt that their child was limited in what subjects they could take at secondary level. One complained that their child could not take the subjects she wanted because they fell into the wrong groupings. Choice could also be limited by the level of demand or by the lack of resources to provide that subject. This was more acute in rural areas.

## **3.8 ACCESSING SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

Every group had some parents who had experienced problems in accessing further support for their child.

A common scenario described is that the parent notices early on that their child is failing to read or write at an early age and identifies this as a problem with the school. The school's response is that it is little to worry about and the problem would likely correct itself. This doesn't happen and then the parent is faced with a much greater difficulty when the school finally recognises that there is a problem.

*“I know a number of parents who have felt that their children have special needs and have been saying as much from the very beginning. I don't mean conflicts, but just difficulties with reading and the teacher's message has been very much “You're making a fuss”, you know, “Let's just see how it goes, they're only primary one, give it a chance”. Same message, p2, p3, it's got to p7 and then “Oh”, suddenly there's a problem...”*

Some parents say that there is great reluctance on the part of the school to test for dyslexia and describe the process of getting extra help for their children as 'a battle'.

Parents want schools to listen to them and recognise and use the knowledge that parents have of their children.

*"They've got to listen to the parents, the parents know the kids. The teacher thinks they know best. The teacher doesn't know best. The bottom line, you know your kid better than anybody"*

Not all have had poor experiences and participants in the Chinese focus group felt that the school had made all the necessary arrangements and this was very helpful. Others also had had experience of specialist support being provided at the time that it was required.

*"Therefore a tutor was specially arranged for them in every morning to help them with their learning. Then they went back to their class in the afternoon. It was very helpful. However, such arrangement is now no longer there."*

*"With my daughter the school was absolutely brilliant and gave her as much learning support as they could. It comes back to the schoolteachers."*

Unfortunately those who have had a positive experience of accessing specialist support were in the minority with more having had some kind of difficulty. One group attributed the difficulties to the lack of resources within the schools to cope with those with learning difficulties. It was mentioned that there appears to be increasing numbers of children being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADHD) and parents feel they received little support in coping with the difficulties that this brings for

their child.

### **3.9 BALANCE OF CURRICULUM BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL SUBJECTS**

There was felt to be increasing emphasis on academic performance. This was compounded by the perceived reduction in the number of jobs available to those who leave school without any qualifications. Some felt that some children would never be 'academic achievers' but parents sought greater choice for their children to follow and do well in vocational subjects. Parents felt this was currently given little prominence within schools. Many children therefore feel excluded by the system and suffer from low self-esteem. Some parents wanted a greater availability of apprenticeship schemes for those who were 'less academic'. Some felt that the introduction of league tables had contributed to this emphasis on passing exams.

*"...there's no jobs really working with your hands or apprenticeships, they're all falling in numbers too, it's very rare to get an apprenticeship."*

*"... it's really important that they shouldn't down the child because he's not necessarily academic, you know. Yet, he's maybe brilliant at woodwork."*

There were also concerns about the effect of national testing which could result in children being labelled in some way. Others felt that it was important to determine the extent of a child's development and national tests did therefore provide a useful purpose although all agreed that labelling a child was inappropriate and unhelpful.

# Chapter 4 Parental interaction with the education system

## 4.1 REASONS FOR CONTACTING SCHOOL

Discussions within the groups highlighted that parents will usually only contact school outwith the scheduled events such as parents' evenings when their child is having some kind of problem. One participant said she would get in touch if there was a change in her child's behaviour. Typical reasons for making contact include bullying, truanting, behaviour within school or learning difficulties. For a small number of parents, contact is determined by the school who call them to the school, through phone or letter to discuss their child, usually concerning some behavioural problem.

*“When your child complains to you about something (that has) happened in school or you think that your child has difficulty in school, then you approach the teacher to discuss your concern.”*

*“My son is really that bad that he used to hide the letters when he first started the high school. Now they send them registered so somebody has got to sign for them but I am not in when the postman comes so he would need to sign for them.”*

## 4.2 BULLYING

Bullying was mentioned by some parents in all groups as a reason why parents have been in touch with schools. Schools approaches to dealing with bullying incidents was described as being dealt with varying levels of success but overall remaining generally poor in the eyes of many parents. This was an issue, which became markedly worse in secondary schools.

One parent described how the head teacher's attitude was very influential on how bullying was handled within a school. Her child's problem had been denied until there was a change of head teacher when the problem was improved.

*“One of my friends is on the parent/teacher thing and when I brought up... well she knew what was happening with my son and she brought it up at one of the meetings... but it was still when it was the old headmaster and he just blanked it completely. You know, “Our school doesn't have bullying”.”*

#### **4.2.1 Conflict resolution**

Some parents thought that conflicts, as in situations of bullying would be better dealt with by getting both parties together to sort the situation out. This would include parents in more serious cases. Parents highlighted access to some type of independent mediation service would be useful in resolving issues such as bullying within schools.

### **4.3 THE CURRICULUM**

Although a number of parents were critical of the focus on academic at the expense of options for vocational subjects within schools this was not an issue which parents contacted schools. Only one parent raised contacting the school about curriculum issues. She was concerned about the focus on academic subjects because her son's interest and talent lay within sport, which was not encouraged.

### **4.4 RAISING AN ISSUE WITH THE SCHOOL**

When parents realise their child is having problems at school, they often feel unsure what they can do about this. The attitude of some of the

teachers was seen as a barrier or indeed part of the problem that they were facing.

The majority of parents would raise the problem with the teacher or the head teacher. Whilst they were usually listened to they felt that this does not always result in something being done about the problem.

#### **4.5 APPROPRIATE TIME TO RAISE AN ISSUE WITH SCHOOL**

There was a wide range of attitudes around getting in touch with their child's school. Some would not hesitate, whilst others saw it as part of their duty to raise issues that the teachers needed to know concerning their child.

*"If that's related to their study, I would raise it because teachers wouldn't know if the child understands or not. Parents should know their children better. So if the parents do not say anything, the teachers will not know."*

Others would wait to see if their child's problem resolved itself before approaching the school. Some were clearly unsure as to when contact was appropriate.

*"I don't know, it's difficult because sometimes things do blow over and as a parent, you never know for sure, is this something I should act on or should I wait this out?"*

One group of parents who had attended parenting courses described how they were now more likely to make contact but they felt that they were no longer typical parents. One view from this group was that the school was very willing to support parents if they do take the trouble to

approach them. This group of parents did however acknowledge that there remained many who would not wish to contact the school either because they didn't want to bother them or because they were intimidated.

Some parents can feel intimidated due to their own poor educational experience. Other reasons include a sense that schools are not parent friendly. Also it is demotivating to have made contact about something and for nothing to be done about your problem. This in itself leads to apathy with parents feeling that there is nothing they can do to affect change.

*"...my palms still sweat and I feel I'm quite an assertive person and I feel I can put my point across quite well, but my palms still sweat when I go in."*

One group felt that opportunities for some children might be reduced because of their parents' reluctance to get involved. Another group described staff at the community school as more approachable and felt that they actually listened to you. There was no reason given as to why staff at the community school were more approachable and this could have been a function of the staff at that particular school rather than its community school status.

#### **4.6 FREQUENCY AND MEANS OF CONTACT**

Typically, parents feel there should be more contact between parents and teachers than there is at present.

Many teachers convey the message that they can be approached at any time, but in practice parents expressed that this does not always happen. Parents will usually make contact either by just turning up, by picking up the phone and making an appointment.

## 4.7 EASE OF GETTING IN TOUCH

Getting in touch was thought to be more difficult at secondary schools than at primary schools. This was attributed to less regular contact with the child's teacher. When the children are very young and parents were actually going to the classroom to pick them up there was more opportunity to speak with a teacher than when they are older. The other advantage of primary schools is that the teacher will know the child much better than the teachers at secondary where each teacher will have very many pupils and will not be able to develop the same relationship as at primary. Some parents stated it was important that a teacher understood the family circumstances if they were to teach their child appropriately.

Contact at secondary level is also complicated by each child having many different subject teachers and usually there is a procedure to go through such as making contact with the child's guidance teachers or registration teacher in the first instance.

One set of parents spoke of their problems accessing a secondary teacher and described a process of having to speak to a receptionist who asked what it was in connection with. They felt that they should not have to explain to the receptionist what this was about. The receptionist would then either ask the parent to wait or if the teacher is unavailable suggest phoning back. Another parent had experienced difficulties accessing a teacher by phone.

However these problems of making contact were not universal and there were also parents who had had no problems getting in touch and who described it as being very easy.

It was seen as beneficial to have access to your child's classroom to see what the children have done and it gives an opportunity to speak with the teacher and more opportunities to do this would increase the opportunities of informal encounters with the teaching staff.

There was very little discussion concerning parents' evenings but some parents and particularly those from the Cantonese speaking focus group mentioned their difficulties getting to parents evening that were held in the evenings because of work commitments at that time of day. One parent also highlighted how long parents' evenings at secondary school were due to the need to meet with many different teachers and how this could be off putting.

*"Time is an issue . . . . . because other parents are working while we are off work. The school cannot make arrangements merely for the Chinese and lose out other parents."*

One parent felt that teachers' perceptions of the child was coloured by whether or not their parents had attended parents evenings and felt that there was an impact on the children of those parents who had not turned up for one reason or another.

*"I honestly didn't know this, that see the parents that go up to all the parents' meetings and all that, and they're like pure right in about their wean's education and all that, right, they're favoured, they weans are slightly favoured."*

#### **4.8 MAKING A COMPLAINT**

Many of the parents had had quite significant difficulties and it might be expected that some of them had made a complaint to the school over

the years. However knowledge about how to go about making a complaint was lacking.

The schools appear to make very little effort to encourage parents to make a complaint. Many parents have spoken to the school when they have had a problem but few have made a formal complaint.

One parent was very concerned about any repercussions that might arise as a result of her making a complaint especially if it was taken to some higher authority.

*“To take it beyond the teacher, beyond to the education department I get this feeling that there seems it could make it worse for that particular child.”*

Another parent said that any formal complaint must be put in writing and this could be a barrier for some parents who are not so good at reading or writing.

One who has made complaints to the school felt that they were not listened to. She took the view that if a child is a problem for the school it is even more difficult to get a complaint heard. The parents' view within this group was that it was not worthwhile trying to complain. Another spoke of the likelihood of parents taking the issue into their own hands if the school is reluctant to do anything about it.

*“If people don't think that things are sorted out by the school, then they'll take things into their own hands.”*

*“I mean this is something that's gone on and on and on and on and on and you're at the end of your tether and you don't know where else to go and things are really desperate, you're close to tears and you think “I need help” and you pick up the phone and then you let go again and you think “Well that was a waste of time” so you just don't know...”*

The Chinese group spoke of how there had been repeated complaints about the lack of hygiene in school toilets and even mice but that no-one seems to do anything about it with the problem perceived to be ignored by the teachers.

Another group where again one or two complaints had been made felt that they were not well handled by the school. One woman who had gone so far as to complain to the local authority felt that she too was not treated well and her complaint did not result in any change. Another had gone through her local authority in an appeal for a bus pass but it had been a very protracted process, although ultimately successful.

*“I don't understand why I had to fight so hard to get him back onto that bus, which was ridiculous because he should've been on it in first place and then it took me about a fortnight of coming and going, phone calls and then going down and sitting in this big panel.”*

#### **4.9 CONTACTING LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

During discussion parents stated that they had very limited contact with local authority education departments. When parents did refer to contact with the local authority this was typically in connection with placing requests or school transport issues.

#### **4.10 LEARNING FROM PROBLEMS**

There were mixed views as to whether schools were keen to learn from the problems that parents might have interacting with them.

One group said that secondary schools do undertake surveys but that they rarely see any results from these and would like to see some feedback. Another group felt that schools probably did want to get

feedback from parents but perhaps didn't know how to go about getting it.

*"Secondary schools are difficult . . . . . they don't even care . . . . . okay, they will give you questionnaires and ask for you comments. You can fill them in but they will not do anything about it."*

Another mentioned that there were a lot of particularly older school teachers who were quite unaware of the extent to which parents can become involved and they are unaware of the realities of many people's lives. Some parents thought that these teachers needed to become more aware of how families live today and the stresses which many of them are under.

#### **4.11 LEVELS OF INTERACTION**

The majority of parents felt that there could be more interaction between themselves and schools than at present. Parents felt that there was very little consultation with them about the development of school policies. One group thought that opportunities existed though they were dependent on how willing parents were to participate. Another group felt that schools could be more proactive in getting parents views. This could be achieved by more one to one meetings with parents or by running focus group style meetings.

*"There should be more parent teacher meetings."*

One group commented that the interaction that happens at present is around individual problems and that parents rarely hear about the more positive aspects.

*"A lot of the interaction is if you are having some problems and you don't often hear about the good things."*

A few groups felt that schools were making an effort in this direction and that some progress was now being made although they recognised that some parents may remain unaware of these efforts.

Parents suggested some improvements that schools could make to improve interaction with parents:

- Schools could treat parents with more respect
- Schools should listen and not judge parents
- Provide a complaints form
- Provide a suggestion box
- Provide support in the form of a mediator or similar advocacy service
- Provide more opportunity for parents to have informal contact with teachers

# Chapter 5      Communication and language

## 5.1      EASE OF TALKING WITH TEACHERS

Some parents found teachers difficult to talk to as they felt they said what they believed parents wanted to hear. This was perhaps most evident when there was some conflict between two children and more than one group described teachers as being two-faced, saying one thing to one set of parents and something else to another.

However this reluctance to tackle difficult messages was not just confined to conflict situations but some parents thought that teachers often said that everything about a child's progress was fine when, as parents, they strongly suspected that it was not. Another group described them as focussing on the positive when talking to parents. They felt however that they needed an honest report of their child's progress if they were to be able to help their child.

*"I will normally ask them about the child's behaviour and performances in the school, but they will not tell you the whole story. They only tell you the positive things and try to avoid the negatives."*

The ease with which parents could talk with a teacher depended very much upon the teacher's personality. Another group mentioned that after school clubs were also a better means of communicating with parents and some of this can be attributed to parents having a regular and informal opportunity to talk rather than arranged meeting times.

Other parents felt that they had good communication with the school and reported no problems.

*"I feel that I can talk to them about anything and they could talk to me about anything."*

## 5.2 LISTENING TO PARENTS

Some parents felt that teachers do not really listen to them. One group was particularly disheartened and felt that parents were in a place where they could not win.

*“There was racism with my son and the school wouldn't listen and I was told that there wasn't a problem in the school and boys will be boys and children were called names and my son had an awful hard time, until we got a new head-teacher and she started to listen.”*

Where a school does listen, parents recognise and appreciate their help in resolving the issue with them to the benefit of their child. One example was given of a guidance teacher who listened to a parent and helped her resolve her child's truancy problems.

*“I got a letter about it and the guidance teacher was... he was brilliant, Mr xxx, he was really, really good and I felt... I didn't feel as if I was being, you know, sort of told off...  
... But they have a different outlook now. Before... I mean that's another big difference, before, if you did something wrong, you were really punished, you know, it's a different side the discipline now, but if you've done something wrong, they'll sort of counsel you almost, you know, and sort of help you with it, and maybe that's a good thing as well”*

## 5.3 LANGUAGE

Language was a significant barrier for the Cantonese speaking parents and was one of the main barriers they faced to good communication. It was not always possible to have an interpreter although they do try and get one for parents meetings.

*"Because we speak limited English, whatever the teachers say, we can only say yes."*

*"I feel that the teachers in primary school speak in simpler English but those in Secondary school usually speak in more difficult English, like more terms."*

Face to face meetings were easier for this group than written communication although they recognised that both were important. Parents would like to see Chinese support workers employed in schools and providing the option to study Chinese as a subject choice.

There were examples in about half of the groups of teachers using a language that would confuse them either accidentally or on purpose. The other criticism was that teachers would talk down to them as if they were children. There needs to be a balance between talking in jargon and being patronising. One group said that an advocacy service, if available, would assist with this problem.

*"Sometimes it's a lot of jargon. You've got to basically say to them "What do you mean by that?" And then they'll explain it."*

*"They challenge you with big words. They will come out with this big word and they will sit there and think that you don't understand it."*

*"I had one of the teachers talking to me as if I was a child."*

#### **5.4 COMMUNICATION ABOUT CHILD'S PROGRESS**

There were mixed views about how well informed parents felt about their child's progress.

Some parents do feel well informed. One group described the situation as improving as they now get two report cards per year plus two parents' evenings.

One group felt that reporting at secondary level was less good as the children sometimes get verbal reports of their progress that they do not always pass on to their parents.

Another felt that reporting was poor with only one report per year and one or two parents' evenings. This group were looking for more frequent reporting than this. Another participant at another group described the report as one sheet of paper which she could not understand.

## **5.5 WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

There was little discussion about written communication and few problems reported. There is more written communication at primary than at secondary although some parents mentioned cannot be certain that pupils at secondary level are passing information onto them.

Participants stated that the main types of written communication are largely newsletters, permission slips and report cards. One parent receives an attendance record for her child and its importance was underlined when it alerted her to the fact that her daughter had been truanting. Another parent has a diary which goes back and forward between home and teacher so that each can write their comments. This was thought to be helpful.

Written communication was the most difficult for the parents who did not speak English as their first language and the Cantonese group said that the reports could be difficult and they often had to resort to using dictionaries. They felt that translation of important written

communication would be helpful and that every school should have access to translation services as a matter of fairness.

*“The words in the report are very difficult. I need to use a dictionary to understand the words. But when you don't understand and speak to him/her, they will explain it to you in much simpler English. The report is too difficult to understand. They should be translated.”*

## **5.6 COMMUNICATION WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

One group spoke of representatives from the local authority coming to a meeting of parents to discuss an issue of school gates - an issue which many parents felt was important to ensuring their child's safety at school. The local authority representative was described as dismissive and even by one participant as rude and this attitude did little to encourage parental involvement in such issues.

Others felt that local authorities should consult with parents to a greater extent over issues such as school closures. Although there have been consultation exercises in the past, parents viewed them as superficial.

# Chapter 6 Advice and information

## 6.1 ACCESSING INDEPENDENT ADVICE

Only one or two of the parents involved in this study could think of any places they could go to if they wanted to get independent advice about their child's education.

*"...if there are issues and you're not sure whether this is something you should take to the head teacher or whether just you want to ride it out and see what happens, it would be great to have somebody that you could, in confidence, talk through those issues and I think our school maybe... I don't know whether they do take that role on, but I know at one stage that was something what parents were saying. We need a place to go with these issues, you know, to get it clear in our eyes."*

Parent teachers' associations were not well known and one group who was aware of them did not consider them to be sufficiently independent. The CAB was mentioned by one other parent.

When asked if there should be a source of independent advice, the majority supported the idea. One parent felt that it was very hard to complain to the school for fear that your child will be bullied by the teachers. One parent would not send a younger child to the same school as his sibling because of this problem. Independent advice might give parents greater confidence to express their views. Another group agreed with this saying that as parents they felt like "little people" and could not fight back. The relationship between parents and teachers is clearly an unbalanced one with the parents feeling that they have little power to influence.

*“I think parents would be far more confident about coming forward about things if there was somebody like that, yes. There's too many parents too feared to voice their opinions - far too many.”*

*“... you're not exactly sure of your own rights and “Am I making a fuss, am I not” and “What's the best way to say this, I don't want any repercussions” .”*

## **6.2 ACCESSING TRAINING**

The majority of parents supported the idea of being able to access training about their role in the education process. One group commented that the child also benefits from seeing that a parent is interested.

Helping parents to help their children with homework was identified as a major training issued, especially where teaching methods have changed notably. Some others mentioned the need for them to be more computer literate in order to keep up with their children. Some parents felt that they could be of little use which could cause tension at home.

Some parents also feel poorly equipped to help their children with the problems that they may be facing at school such as other children making fun of them or their children not wanting to go to school.

The parenting courses, which had been attended by some participants, were seen as being very helpful in improving their relationships with their children. However the proportion of parents who have attended these courses are reported by the participants in these discussions to be low. One group also commented that the very parents who would benefit most from these types of courses are the ones who are the least likely to attend and that it is the same parents that are likely to be seen

on different courses. There were no suggestions as to how to improve the take up rate.

One group suggested help for parents could be balanced by the introduction of social workers or similar attached to each year group who could be independent and not exhibit favouritism in the way that some teachers were perceived as doing.

Any courses that are run should take into account parents lifestyles and must be arranged at the right time with crèche facilities provided. Another group mentioned that whilst some parents might be interested, not all would be able to attend due to lack of time.

*“Our school puts on those kinds of events, but they're during the day when people are working and they don't put on a crèche, so three people turn up and the school says “Oh it's no good doing anything because nobody turns up” - but there's no crèche and it's at a time that doesn't suit parents.”*

Another possible negative effect was the concern expressed by one participant that more and more of the onus for education would be moved onto the parent from the education system. Whilst a balance needs to be achieved she was concerned that the balance might slip too far.

# Chapter 7      Improving parental consultation and involvement

## 7.1      AWARENESS OF SCHOOL POLICIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The majority of parents are aware that schools have a range of policies on different issues. Some said that they are sent these but one said it was very hard to remember them all or that they were lengthy and difficult to read. Another two groups mentioned that whilst there may be policies on some issues it was not necessarily the case that the schools will implement these policies.

When asked if parents were aware of the responsibility that they had for their children within the education system, the majority felt that they did know. However few elaborated on what these responsibilities were other than to support their child and take an interest and make sure they went to school.

*“Parents should also support their children with the coursework. If they have problems, we should try our best to help them. If it's still unsolved, then we seek help from the teachers. We shouldn't just leave it to the teachers, we have our responsibilities as well.”*

They all expected the school to ensure the safety of their child but this was an area that was only likely to be highlighted when something went wrong. One man for example spoke of how his son was expelled but the letter informing him of this did not arrive prior to school the next day and so he duly delivered the child to school the next day where some teachers saw him being dropped off. The child then sustained an injury during the time that the parent had expected the child to be safely in school. This was clearly a communication failure which resulted in no-one having responsibility for that child that day and this was seen by the parent to be a significant failing.

*"So you think he's in there safe, but he's not in there safe, 'cause he's outside wandering the street."*

Another spoke of a stranger walking into the playground who approached her child. On another occasion a child was beaten up by another in the playground and a teacher who had been watching from a window commented "Oh I could see that was going to happen".

Another was concerned that her child was put out the door at 3.00pm whether she had arrived or not and expected the child to be cared for until she arrived if she was delayed in some way.

This highlights a few areas where parents felt the policies on ensuring the safety of their children have been compromised.

One group indicated that the teachers themselves might not be totally familiar with school policies, particularly those teachers who had been there a long time and were perhaps more set in their ways.

*"I feel that not all the teachers know the policies, because specially when my son and with him... like he's mixed race, and that he had an awful lot of bother and when I went to see the new head teacher, she handed me this booklet on their policy... so I took it home and read it and when I went back, I said to her "Are your staff aware of this?" and she sort of looked at me and she says "Well what do you mean?" and I said "Well I can assure you that there are situations in here that have occurred with my son and the teachers haven't responded in the way that is stated down in the book". And she went 2Oh, oh well we're having a staff meeting in a week's time and I'll bring it up...", some of the old school are sort of that stuck in their ways that they're not changing with society."*

## 7.2 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL POLICIES

There were mixed views as to the extent to which parents would wish to be involved in the development of school policies. Some parents felt that they should definitely be involved. Others feel that they do not have time or that some issues can get very complex and would be "above their heads". There tended to be an image of anything to do with policy as being little to do with them despite having sometimes quite strong views on issues such as school transport, uniform and discipline to name but a few. Parents' views were seen as only being represented by those who have time on their hands to shout about things. Another commented that they should have a lot to say about these issues but that they don't seem to in practice, suggesting that there might be a gap in the way in which views are heard.

Some commented on the lack of consultation with parents and this was one area where schools could be more proactive. The way in which an issue is presented to parents may therefore affect the likelihood of parents getting involved.

*"I'm not going to go into it in detail, but my daughter's school is being closed and we had a massive consultation exercise but it wasn't a real consultation exercise, I think everybody knew that the decision was made at the beginning."*

The parents who are already involved with the school deter some others from doing so. Their own experiences of school and teachers attitudes were barriers to involvement generally.

Others said that teachers should be able to get on with the job that they were paid for and felt they themselves did not have a role to play.

*“I've also heard parents say that they think that the schools expect too much of parents nowadays - “That it's the school's job to educate” and some parents get very resentful of the amount of homework and “That's not my job, it's not a parent's job”. And then you know, when all the letters come home and all the documents, it's “Don't bother me” you know.”*

### **7.3 PARENTS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SCHOOLS**

There were mixed views as to whether parents felt they were in a partnership with school. They all saw their role in their child's education as an important one but the extent to which they were in partnership was less clear to them.

If a partnership was seen at all, it was rare for this to be seen as an equal partnership and many parents felt that the school exerts its authority over parents. It was difficult to challenge the school, although one group said that assertiveness courses could help.

*“It seems that the school has more power than parents. We are not equal.”*

*“But parents and the schools share same amount of responsibilities in teaching the child.”*

### **7.4 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AT LOCAL AUTHORITY OR NATIONAL LEVEL**

Like involvement with school policies, most parents saw involvement at a local authority level or even national level as not being something for them. When asked directly of their interest in being involved, there was little positive response. One has to be careful how this is interpreted.

Whilst many would not have the time or interest to become involved in discussions at a higher level, it was clearly evident from other parts of the discussion that some would like more opportunity to express their views. Examples included commenting on discipline policies and proposed school closures where there had been criticisms over the lack of consultation. It was essential that local authorities and national government ensure that they create the appropriate means for parents to make their views known. The challenge will be to develop methods of involvement that are relevant and where it is easy for parents to make a contribution.

## **7.5 PARENT/TEACHERS' ASSOCIATIONS (PTAS)/ SCHOOL BOARDS**

The majority of participants did not hold their local Parent/Teachers' Associations in high regard. This was a common view across all groups with the exception of the Chinese group who had had no contact with them.

The associations or school boards were widely described as being a 'clique' which average parents would not wish to join. Members of the Parent Teachers Associations were described generally as those middle class parents, who are usually in employment and are part of two parent families. There was a little or no representation from single parent families or parents who were unemployed.

*"They don't want to get involved with you because you are one parent family and on income support and its "I've got X amount of cars and I've got X amounts of this." I am not into any of that."*

A Parent/Teachers' Association was described by one woman who had ventured to attend a meeting as opinionated, such that it was difficult to

get a word in edgeways. They were seen as dominating which would be intimidating for the less assertive parent. They can also be patronising although it is uncertain whether this was deliberate or not.

Those who sat on the Parent/Teachers' Association or on the school board were generally voted into their positions of the board or committee and had to put themselves forward for election. This usually meant having to write something about yourself saying why you are a suitable candidate. This was a deterrent for many parents and was a procedure which would favour the confident middle class professionals who tended to dominate. As a result these organisations were not perceived as representative of the full range of parents.

*"I mean I have to say, at the academy, the members of the school board, it tends to be the people...It is like the local vet and the local doctor. It tends to be the same ones..."*

Some parents would not know how to make contact with their school board or their Parent/Teachers' Association.

## **7.6 GETTING PARENTS MORE INVOLVED**

Many parents would like to be more involved than they currently are. One parent said that parents have a very big part to play in our children's education and so schools should involve parents a lot more in what they are doing.

However there were barriers that need to be overcome. The main barriers include:

- Time
- Lack of childcare
- Language
- Teachers attitude

Time is a major barrier. Many parents' meetings for example are arranged for early evening. The Chinese parents stated that this is the very time that they are out at work and cannot attend. The lack of available childcare was a further barrier for some parents.

Language is another barrier for the Cantonese speakers which prevents their involvement. Having a few Chinese teachers or even support workers in the school who are Cantonese speakers would be beneficial.

*"We should get together to form a group, so that we will be powerful enough to make our ideas heard."*

*"There can be a meeting, or conference, or seminar, for all Chinese parents. So we know what's going on regarding education and we can discuss things."*

Schools could encourage more involvement from parents by creating more approachable environments. Some parents see the school as a frightening and intimidating place. It was felt teachers' attitudes could make a difference here.

Participants identified a range of mechanisms as potential ways of improving involvement with schools. The school should also have more open days. Another suggestion was to have some kind of spokesperson for parents but it was feared that the same type who ran the PTA would be the ones to put themselves forward. The suggestion of the after school homework club put forward by one group was seen as an initiative where parent / teacher interaction could be encouraged on a more informal basis. Other similar opportunities for parental interaction could be arranged such as soft starts and finishes.

*“I would also like to see primary and secondary schools all having an after school till 6pm session staffed by teachers where the pupils can go along with problems, I am talking more about homework type of things and the parents if necessary to be able to talk through things.”*

*“The parents are allowed to go in on a Monday morning from 9am to 9.30am and sit with the kids.”*

*“And then on a Friday from 2.30pm to 3pm.”*

*“It is really good.”*

*“I think the schools should have a half hour in the morning when they invite you in.”*

Suggestions to improve involvement include:

- Making schools more friendly and approachable and relaxed
- More open days
- Spokesperson for parents
- After school homework club where parents can talk with teachers
- Soft starts and finishes to allow parents access to teachers
- Improved access so that parents feel they can go into the school
- Seminars held in various ethnic minority languages
- More training for teachers on emotional /social needs of children/ young people
- Actively seeking parental feedback using questionnaires etc
- Courses for parents on current teaching methods
- Translating documents into ethnic minority languages
- Provide mediators between schools and families

## **7.7 REPRESENTATION OF PARENTAL VIEWS NATIONALLY**

Few felt there was a good system for representing their views. Some thought that they had no voice whatsoever and had little time for the local authority councillors. Others were aware that they could go and see their local councillor or their MP but this would be a very rare occurrence with few ever having seen their elected representative. One participant took the view that elected representatives were quite out of touch with the electorate. One group took the view that schools should be taken out of local authority control.

## Chapter 8      A way forward

Parents' perceptions of their children's education are clearly influenced by the number and types of problems that their children encounter in the course of their education.

Many parents contact with schools was as a result of their effort to manage the difficulties their children were having rather than working in partnership with the school to enhance their child's educational experience or opportunities. Parents were essentially fire fighting in an effort to keep problems at bay.

There is an increasing recognition amongst both schools and parents that more parental involvement is beneficial. All would like to see it encouraged, but at present it is seen to be handled less well than it might be. The very fact that involvement with schools appears to be largely negative and focussed on problems rather than on improvements is bound to influence perceptions.

Many of the problems facing children and young people in schools are adversely affecting their education and many parents are at a loss as to what they can do about it. They look to schools for assistance in sorting out behaviour problems, discipline issues, lack of respect, truanting or learning difficulties and on a number of occasions perceive that the school appear to be doing little about these issues either. They see teachers as being under mounting pressures of their own and acknowledge that they have a difficult job. Perhaps due to school's lack of willingness or lack of ability to tackle these issues, parents feel dissatisfied.

The attitudes of a few teachers who may have been dismissive of problems or not listening properly or even exacerbating already stressful situations all added to this sense of dissatisfaction.

The main problems their children had and for which parents tended to make contact with school concerned:

- Bullying
- Behaviour
- Learning difficulties.

In addition children were under increasing pressure to pass exams and the combination of this within a difficult school environment could simply lead to overload. It was clear that not only do some children find school stressful but parents and families are suffering additional stress because of the problems school brings to their child. The high levels of emotion expressed at some of the discussions indicate how important many of these issues are for parents.

Whilst there is recognition that parents do have a very important role to play in their child's education, the partnership, where it exists, is largely seen as an unequal one, where the school make use of their authority to assert their role.

Parents are seeking help with the problems that their children were having and whilst not common, there were some examples of good practice or suggestions where parents and schools can work productively together. The remainder of this chapter aims to identify areas where such improvements can be made.

### **Discipline**

Parents welcome improved discipline in schools but are wary of overly harsh regimes. This is clearly one area where good consultation would be beneficial to developing *discipline policies*, which can be supported by parents at home. Some parents preferred schools to have a policy of having a school uniform, which was thought to improve discipline and reduce incidents of bullying.

### **Parenting skills**

Many parents lack parenting skills and others simply recognise that being a parent is a difficult job. When a child starts to have behavioural problems and may even become a source of disruption in the classroom, many parents are at a loss as to how to deal with the situation. They themselves are seeking advice and understanding and understandably look to the school for advice and guidance. When they see their child's school also not coping and indeed even blaming the parent for the child's behaviour, they can feel very let down.

One solution was training for parents including *parenting courses, shared learning courses, self-development courses or assertiveness courses*.

Parenting courses were very well thought of by those parents who had attended them. Having a shared strategy to deal with children's behaviour difficulties would be one area where partnership could yield positive results. Shared learning courses similarly helped parents to understand teaching methods and assist their children at home.

### **Improved communication**

Parents also welcomed the idea of having further support in their communications with schools with regard to advice and information, mediation and advocacy.

### **Advice and information**

Firstly they would welcome access to an *independent source of advice* about their child's education. Currently they did not know where they could go and if they have a problem feel their only source would be the school or in extreme cases the local authority. Parents regarded both the school and the local authority as lacking independence.

### **Mediation or advocacy**

Parents also spoke of having the option to *access a mediator or an advocacy service* whereby someone could help them in their discussions with schools. This was a suggestion that was strongly supported, although there was a desire for this to remain an option, as some would prefer to sort out issues on their own.

*“I think in some occasions it could be a nuisance.”*

*“It would be nice to know that the service is there.”*

Benefits mentioned included:

- Help ethnic minority parents feel more secure and assure them that they have a full understanding of what was being said
- Help keep discussion calm
- Would provide support for the teacher
- Would help eliminate any bias that a teacher may have

*“If I made a complaint I would quite like back-up from somewhere though, I don't think I could do it on my own.”*

### **Support for pupils**

Some pupils are also perceived to be suffering from difficulties in dealing with their relationships with others and with their emotions. Two strategies were suggested to deal with this.

*Self development courses for pupils* including assertiveness courses which could be made available from P5 onwards.

Children were seen to benefit greatly from self development courses which can be provided from about P5 onwards and one group suggested that this be made more widely available. One group having seen the benefits from this type of course felt that schools need to be looking more creatively about bringing in other people to impart these kinds of skills to young people.

*“I actually feel that a course in personal development or something... or assertiveness is really needed because a lot of kids going through high school and that and finding it hard to settle in and such like.”*

*“An assertiveness course brought him out brilliant and I’m not just talking about him, the actual group, because we had feedback from like the group itself and each and every one of them that attended that.”*

***Independent, confidential counselling services should also be available in schools for pupils.*** This would be particularly appropriate for secondary school pupils.

A number of groups advocated that there be a dedicated counselling service, which would operate in an entirely confidential basis and be available in all schools. This was thought to be already available in some schools. Access to such a service would have to be available on a confidential basis as its worth could be undermined by other children latching on to some children feeling the need to access such a service and using this information as yet another reason to pick on them

*“I would like personally to see a counsellor system and I think some schools are doing that already. A counselling service dedicated in the school for pupils and it is entirely confidential that they feel they can go to someone and talk to someone about what concerns them.”*

The guidance system was not thought to be working due to the other commitments that this teacher had including their own teaching duties. In one case it was the guidance teacher who was causing the child's problems.

*"... the guidance teacher was fine, don't get me wrong, but I think they're needing somebody on a wee bit higher level that the weans can actually communicate with and sit and be able to open up and say "This is how I feel and this is what people are saying". But the weans are bottling it and they're keeping it inside them."*

It would therefore be preferable for a counselling service to be available within schools but which was separate from the teaching staff and seen as an independent source of advice.

Schools too can become more understanding of the personal difficulties that children may have. One example was provided where a parent discovered that her child had been truanting. Instead of punishments, school and parents made an effort to understand the cause of the child's behaviour and provide a solution. In this instance the parent felt the guidance teacher had sought to listen to the child's problems and this was beneficial for all. **Good listening skills** are therefore essential to improved relationships between school, pupil and parent. Teachers must also act in a **professional manner** respecting the child's privacy and dignity and keeping problems where possible confidential.

### **Support for learning**

Where a child was thought to be falling behind, parents would like teachers to listen more to their concerns and **deal with learning difficulties at an earlier stage** before they became a problem for the child and affected his/her self-esteem and confidence and even relationships with others. Access to learning support should be offered as appropriate and not have to be fought for by parents.

Teachers should also offer more encouragement and recognition of children's efforts.

There were other suggested schemes which could assist children with their school work. One group spoke of a successful "*buddies*" scheme whereby children are helped by their older peers. This not only provides help for the younger pupil but can have the effect of raising the self-esteem of the older pupil.

### **Extra curricular activities**

One group spoke positively about a *homework club* which was available in the evenings and which allows the children to access computers. Another similar club was run as an after school activity but the children were selected to go to this club and it is not available to all. This type of initiative was very welcomed since there was a perceived lack of youth or sports clubs. There was a wish for the availability to be extended.

After school activities were also welcomed by parents as not only providing additional opportunities for their children but fitting in with the timetable of working parents.

### **Balance within the curriculum**

There was thought to be too much focus on academic subjects and passing exams. The current environment could lead a child to feel excluded by the system and many parents felt that their children would benefit from the option of following more vocational courses. There was a demand from a number of groups to provide more access to vocational subjects and less of a focus on academic subjects for some pupils.. Education should also be preparing the children for real life to a greater extent and they should be taught social skills and life skills.

### **Involvement strategies**

Schools should try and learn more from the problems that they were having and *feedback from parents* is an essential part of this. Schools should therefore be *more proactive* in accessing the views of parents via questionnaires, focus group meetings etc, complaints/suggestions boxes, providing informal opportunities to talk with parents, more open days etc. It was not sufficient to have a Parents Teachers Association and a school board, which were seen by the parents of these groups to be unrepresentative of average parents.

### **Clear complaints procedures**

Currently, parents felt that schools discouraged complaints and some parents were reluctant to make complaints for fear that there would be repercussions for their child. Schools should encourage parents to provide their views including complaints.

### **Improved consultation**

Parental involvement in schools is seen as improving and parents generally welcome this. Whilst they have an interest in involvement with the day to day issues of the school and are happy to be consulted on issues of policy that they can relate to such as homework, discipline, uniform or transport policies to name a few, they are not so keen to have to read lengthy policy documents and get involved in things which many of them see as being "over their heads". *Involvement must therefore be seen to be relevant* to their lives. This provides a challenge to schools to involve parents more on parents' terms, in a way that they can understand and relate to. Where meetings are required, they should be arranged at times which are convenient to parents and for which childcare is available.

There were many examples given by parents to indicate that there were many children in schools today for whom their education is not a happy experience. Much of this unhappiness comes from pupils' behaviour problems and lack of discipline. For parents, their children's happiness was their priority and this came well before academic performance. Many of the parents who took part in these discussions had had a poor experience themselves of their own education and the last thing they wished for was for their children to have to go through a similar difficult time.

*“Well I sent mine to a different school from the one I went to, because I vowed I wasn't sending mine to that school because of what happened to me. And it's happened again, and that's what making me angry now.”*

Parents throughout this study, no matter what their background or the difficulties they had faced with their children, had one thing in common, they all wanted the best possible education for their children. For some this was recognised as not being necessarily an academic study but as good preparation for adult life with the option of getting a good job at the end of it. Their children were not being served well by the current education system but it is hoped that the problems highlighted in the course of this study and the suggestions they made for improvement would go some way to improving the situation for those children currently entering the system.

# Appendix 1 About the Scottish Consumer Council and the Scottish Parenting Forum

## SCOTTISH CONSUMER COUNCIL

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) was set up by government in 1975. Our purpose is to promote the interests of consumers in Scotland, with particular regard to those people who experience disadvantage in society. While producers of goods and services are usually well-organised and articulate when protecting their own interests, individual consumers very often are not. The people whose interests we represent are consumers of all kinds: they may be patients, tenants, parents, solicitors' clients, public transport users, or simply shoppers in a supermarket.

Consumers benefit from efficient and effective services in the public and private sectors. Service-providers benefit from discriminating consumers. A balanced partnership between the two is essential and the SCC seeks to develop this partnership by:

- carrying out research into consumer issues and concerns;
- informing key policy and decision-makers about consumer concerns and issues;
- influencing key policy and decision-making processes;
- informing and raising awareness among consumers.

The SCC assesses the consumer perspective in any situation by analysing the position of consumers against a set of consumer principles. These are:

- ACCESS - Can consumers actually get the goods or services they need or want?
- CHOICE - Can consumers affect the way the goods and services are provided through their own choice?
- INFORMATION - Do consumers have the information they need, presented in the way they want, to make informed choices?

- REDRESS - If something goes wrong, can it be put right?
- SAFETY - Are standards as high as they can reasonably be?
- FAIRNESS - Are consumers subject to arbitrary discrimination for reasons unconnected with their characteristics as consumers?
- REPRESENTATION - If consumers cannot affect what is provided through their own choices, are there other effective means for their views to be represented?

The SCC is part of the National Consumer Council (NCC) and is sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry. The SCC's Chairman and Council members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in consultation with the Secretary of State for Scotland. Future appointments will be in consultation with the First Minister. Martyn Evans, the SCC's Director, leads the staff team.

For further information about the SCC please contact:

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## SCOTTISH PARENTING FORUM

The Scottish Parenting Forum (SPF) is managed and facilitated by Children in Scotland. Children in Scotland is the united voice of over 300 voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals working with children and their families throughout Scotland. The SPF has an elected Steering Group composed of voluntary and statutory agencies and parent representatives.

The aims of the Scottish Parenting Forum are:

- To raise awareness of:
  - the needs of parents
  - the widespread individual and social impact of parenting
  - the impact of changing family structures and the changing profile of 'parents'.
- To change the climate of opinion to ensure that parents are better supported.
- To raise awareness of the impact of different policies on parents and children; and to press for greater coherence in policy affecting parents and children.
- To create a national network of those working in, and concerned with, supporting parents in order to share information and expertise.

The Community Fund has funded a three-year Scottish development programme of the Scottish Parenting Forum. The programme is designed to support voluntary and community agencies in working together to develop and improve sustainable forms of parent support in the community. The project is now in the third year of a three year development programme. The objectives of the development programme are:

- To provide and disseminate information on the needs of parents, forms of support for parents and the impact of policies on parents.
- To ensure the needs of parents are addressed at national and local levels.
- To develop good practice in facilitating the participation of parents in policy, planning and the delivery of relevant voluntary services and resources.
- To facilitate the development of local fora of voluntary and community agencies concerned with the local development of parent support.
- To establish a basis for the sustainability of parent support services and resources within the voluntary sector.

For further information about SPF please contact:

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