PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT:
Improving outcomes for students with disability

A partnership approach to parental engagement

A partnership approach to parental engagement aims to give students with disability the best chance to achieve their potential. Family-school partnerships are collaborative relationships and activities involving school staff, parents, carers or guardians, and other members of the child's family.

Effective partnerships are based on mutual commitment, trust and respect, and shared responsibility for the education of the child.

Research indicates that best practice in working with students with disability can include a multi-disciplinary team of family, school and health professionals. This could include speech pathologists, occupational therapists, paediatricians, and psychologists. All members of a child's team bring a unique set of knowledge, skills and experience that help make learning successful for the student. All members of the team have a role in making a partnership work.

Disability Standards for Education 2005

In Australia, all education providers including schools are required to comply with the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education). These Standards explicitly state that all educational institutions must consult with the student or an "associate" of the student regarding how a disability

affects the student's ability to access education or training. An associate could include a child's parent, carer, or advocate. Schools are also required to consult when determining what adjustments will be made to support a child's access to school.

Why should families and schools work in partnership?

Research has found that the benefits of effective family-school partnerships include a range of positive outcomes:

- student learning increases and educational outcomes are improved
- students' behaviour management problems are reduced
- there are fewer student suspensions from school; increased attendance, retention and graduation rates
- parents and carers contribute more time and expertise to the school

- parents and carers are more supportive of school programs
- teachers have a comprehensive knowledge of students
- teacher morale increases
- teachers are more appreciative of parents and carers and their skills
- there are flow-on positive relationships between the school and the broader school community.

When schools and families work together they can identify and prioritise goals and solve problems collaboratively. When decisions are made collaboratively, everyone involved is more inclined to commit to student goals and objectives.

How can schools engage effectively with parents and carers?

Parents and carers bring important information, knowledge and experience to the educational partnership. They can share their children's interests, likes and dislikes, and preferred learning styles. These can be incorporated in learner profiles and individual education plans or IEPs. Interests can be powerful motivators to improve students' participation in less preferred activities.

Joint problem solving—for example in the context of a planning meeting—can provide an opportunity for school staff, parents and carers and students to brainstorm ideas and learn from each other. Parents and carers of children with disability have often experienced successful interventions and strategies in the past and can help schools to replicate supports.

When working with students with disability and their families, schools should focus on students' strengths as well as identifying the challenges requiring further support. A strengths-based approach can use a student's strengths to develop areas of need, and values the student's interests by incorporating these into the academic program.

Key elements of an effective partnership

There are several important elements to an effective family-school partnership.

Communication

Good communication includes:

- sharing resources
- being clear
- being tactful
- being honest
- active listening.

Commitment

Commitment to making a partnership work involves:

- being flexible
- encouraging the child and family
- being accessible to child and family
- being sensitive to emotion, including empathy versus sympathy.

Equality

Equal family-school relationships include:

- avoiding use of "clout"—power imbalance
- being willing to explore options
- validating others.

Skills

Skills that are needed to make partnerships work include:

- taking action
- being willing to learn
- meeting individual needs.

Trust

In partnerships based on trust, adults will focus on:

- being reliable
- keeping the child safe
- being discreet.

Respect

Respectful relationships involve:

- being non-judgemental
- being courteous
- valuing the child
- avoiding intrusion.

GROWTH model

A problem-solving framework that schools and families can draw on to work together is the GROWTH model. More information on this model is available at the Australian Government's Positive Partnerships website (www.positivepartnerships.com.au). A summary of the model is provided in the following table.

Table 1: the GROWTH problem-solving framework

Letter	Outcome	Issues to consider
G	GOAL	What do you want to work on?
R	REALITY	What is happening now?
O	OPTIONS	What are your options?
W	WILL	What will you do?
T	TACTICS	How will you do this?
H	HABITS	How will you sustain your success?

Key points to remember

There are several key points to remember when building family-school partnerships:

- parents and school staff need to recognise and understand the importance of collaborative practice
- parents and school staff both bring important information to the educational partnership
- parents are important contributors to the process of forward planning

- schools can influence the way parents feel about the value of their contributions
- it is important to acknowledge the challenges that both parents and schools face
- for an effective collaborative partnership to develop, both points of view must be acknowledged
- other family members, including siblings, are part of the family-school partnership.

More information

There are many resources and sources of support for schools and families to help them work effectively together. A good starting point is state or territory government, Catholic and independent education authorities, which can identify resources that may be available to support schools and parents locally. Websites for local authorities can be accessed through:

- www.education.gov.au/school-education
- www.ncec.catholic.edu.au
- www.isca.edu.au

Information on other useful websites follows.

Australian Government-funded websites

The Safe Schools Hub website has information on connecting with your child's school (www.safeschoolshub.edu.au/for-parents/your-part/connecting-with-your-child's-school) and on children with special needs (www.safeschoolshub.edu.au/for-parents/what-to-do-about-/special-needs).

The Positive Partnerships website includes information and resources for parents of children with an autism spectrum disorder (www.positivepartnerships.com.au).

The Raising Children Network website has information for parents of children with a disability (www.raisingchildren.net.au/children_with_disabilities/children_with_disability.html).

The [Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau](#) website has information to support parental engagement and community involvement in schools (www.familyschool.org.au).

Sources

Information in this fact sheet was adapted from material developed for the Australian Government Department of Education through the [Positive Partnerships initiative](#), which supports schools and families of children with an autism spectrum disorder (www.positivepartnerships.com.au).
Please note that links to online resources are provided for information only and the views expressed in these resources do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government Department of Education.