



The Four Pillars of Parental Engagement

Empowering schools to connect
better with parents and pupils

Justin Robbins and Karen Dempster

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Preface

We are passionate about engaging parents to work together with schools so that future generations can be at their best. We believe in it so much that it was the reason we founded Fit2Communicate in 2015.

As parents of school-aged children at various stages of their lives, we were aware that schools were trying to get parental engagement right. But our experience of being engaged as parents was very inconsistent and at times downright terrible! We are both professional communicators, with nearly 50 years of experience between us. We have worked for corporate organisations, in roles with a strong focus on audience engagement, and with individuals wanting to develop their communication skills. We believed that we could use our professional experience and knowledge to make a difference to education through communication, not just for our own children but for all those who follow.

Initially, we didn't quite know how to support our children's education or school-related development. However, we were very supportive of the school leaders and teachers who were clearly trying to do their best to reach out to parents wherever they could, especially on top of so many other priorities. We considered that it might be helpful if we developed some simple approaches to address what we saw as some of the challenges faced by school leaders – in particular, parental engagement.

Our initial action was to listen – the first step in our communication philosophy that you will become familiar with as you read this book. Our intention was to validate our own views and experiences with other parents and school leaders. We are very grateful to the hundreds of parents who have shared their opinions with us and who let us know that we weren't alone in our experiences. Many expressed similar concerns about communication.

Free-form comments from parents, gathered through our research, highlighted the huge level of inconsistency in parental engagement across the UK. Positive comments such as: 'It's a relationship of mutual respect where they listen to and consider the needs of parents in supporting their child's learning,' and 'I feel lucky that my daughter goes to a school which has a lovely happy vibe, that is open to ideas and wants good links with parents and the community,' were contrasted with negative comments such as: 'They aren't very interested in my viewpoint. I feel they

believe they know best,' and 'There is no consistency across the teachers. Lack of communication and preparation for understanding pupils and their needs.'

We knew we had to turn our attention to understanding the situation from a school's perspective too. Once again, we are extremely grateful to the school leaders and teachers who took the time to speak to us at the beginning of our journey. They helped us to understand life from the inside and the scale of challenges that parents just do not see. They told us: 'Building relationships with parents requires time and skill. It's an investment,' and 'Communication is key and needs to be done early on. Over-communicate. Have an open door. Listen.' But once again, there were many negative comments such as: 'Relationships between staff and parents are inconsistent across the school. Expectations are not set or consistently monitored by the SLT,' and 'I think the school could do much more to involve parents in co-planning, development, production and evaluating rather than just telling them what is happening or collecting tokenistic feedback.' But it is possibly this final comment that captured the prevailing mood and the challenge we are seeking to address with this book and our parental engagement model: 'I have been teaching for 20 years and I have seen little difference [in parental engagement] in this time.'

After our initial research, we developed and started to share our simple school communication models. Some of these were published in our first book, *How to Build Communication Success in Your School: A Guide for School Leaders* (Dempster and Robbins, 2017), which received very positive feedback. As we began to work directly with more schools and multi-academy trusts across the country, and with the Department for Education, it became clear to us there was more to be done on parental engagement.

Despite the fact that parental engagement has a proven positive impact on pupil performance, support for teachers is still limited in this area. There are programmes such as the Teacher Classroom Management Program by Incredible Years, based in the United States, which offers assistance to teachers to help parents become more involved in their child's education and promote consistency between home and school.¹ There are organisations like Parentkind in the UK which provide guidance, frameworks, toolkits and resources for schools and teachers,² and the Leading Parent Partnership Award which helps schools to work in association with parents and carers to support improved outcomes in all aspects of school life.³

1 See <https://www.incredibleyears.com/programs/teacher/classroom-mgt-curriculum>.

2 See <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/For-Parents/Parent-Hub/Get-involved-at-school>.

3 See <https://www.awardplace.co.uk/award/lppa>.

Schools are faced with the opposing challenges of parents who won't engage and those who are extremely critical. There are also those who have high expectations of schools and those who are difficult to deal with, often because their high expectations are not being met. Some parents would like to engage more, but the pressures of work, finances, family life and other factors may make this difficult. It is clearly important that schools are supportive of individual situations, working alongside parents and not adding more demands.

People are also bombarded by a huge amount of information every day from computers and phones, including emails, texts, real-time news and social media feeds. All of these are competing for the attention – and precious time – of busy parents that schools are working hard to actively engage in their children's education. Simultaneously, parents' expectations of the education system are changing: they want schools to ensure that their children are prepared for their future careers, with the right mindsets and skills. Other expectations may originate from the backgrounds, values, mindsets and culture of parents in the local community.

Getting parental engagement right will enhance a school's reputation. It will lead to a positive, supportive and happy workplace for the whole school team. And it will help to improve pupils' learning, attendance, behaviour and, the ultimate focus: results. Based on evidence that we will explore, we believe that parental engagement is the missing element in creating a seamless relationship between home and school.

This book is a culmination of our journey so far, and our attempt to fill the gap that currently exists in this critical area – one that has become even more critical in 2021. In fact, right now is a particularly relevant time to pause and take a closer look at parental engagement. We are entering a post-COVID world that has accelerated the change we were already experiencing as part of the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016). Technology is blurring the lines between the physical, digital and biological. We are seeing the emergence of disruptive technologies and trends such as the internet of things, virtual reality, augmented reality, robotics and artificial intelligence.

These technologies are changing and will continue to change our lives, both at work and at home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, online learning became pretty much the only solution for schools and universities. This experience has opened educators' minds to fresh possibilities for blended learning and new ways of sharing information and communicating with parents. The habits and understanding created during this period have (hopefully) impacted on parents'

willingness to provide a positive learning environment at home. It may also have improved the relationship between parents and school because parents have a new-found appreciation for what schools do every day.

Parents' expectations and technological capabilities have also evolved. They are more confident in their ability to use online systems and portals, and so expect schools to provide information in these more flexible and convenient ways.

Increasingly, some parents are starting to doubt the tenets of a traditional education system. This view is supported by work from the World Economic Forum which suggests that we will need different skills and jobs in the future. Their 2018 report, *Towards a Reskilling Revolution*, states that analytical thinking, innovation, active learning, learning strategies, technology design, programming and human skills will continue to rise in prominence. Human skills include creativity, originality, initiative, critical thinking, persuasion, negotiation, attention to detail, resilience, flexibility and complex problem-solving. We will also see an increase in demand for emotional intelligence, leadership, social influence and service orientation.

Most parents want schools to teach their children the skills and mindsets they will need in the future. Yet, many schools are still delivering a curriculum model from the 1960s, where parental engagement was rarely a requirement. Furthermore, education leaders are constantly firefighting and balancing numerous priorities, often unable to focus on the bigger picture, let alone the future. This inertia, combined with increased parental demands, seems destined to create greater friction in school-parent relationships. When parents experience outdated thinking and approaches, trust is lost and frustration kicks in, which then starts to seep into daily relationships and interactions. It may show itself in unexpected ways and can slowly damage a school's ability to work well with parents.

This trust is put on further rocky ground when parents start to question previously respected and reliable sources of information: we are all now far less likely to believe everything we see and read. This has been driven by social media and the fear of fake news. Add in the tensions of identity politics – whether that is gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, health, physical or mental ability – and the potential to get inclusive parental engagement wrong snowballs.

In developing this book, we carried out quantitative (survey based) and qualitative (interview based) research with parents, school teams and pupils from across the UK to understand the current view of parental engagement in schools. This work was built on existing published research.

We asked parents to define what their child's success at school looked like to them. The top response was for them to be 'happy' (accounting for 29% of all responses), followed by academic success (24%). Next were life skills, including being 'confident' (11%), 'engaged in learning' (10%), 'socialised' (9%) and the 'best they can be' (9%). Interestingly, parents claimed that their child's happiness was more important than pure academic success. This is an important consideration because being happy covers many areas that are relevant to active parental engagement, which is a key area of tension when we consider the importance of school performance tables. Being 'well socialised', which included areas such as having a strong friendship group and good communication skills, also came through strongly.

In our research, pupils reported a strong desire to have the support of their parents, regardless of age bracket: 82% of them told us that their parents' support affected how well they did at school. It confirmed the need for both the push and pull of active parental engagement – a push from the school and a pull from the pupils.

The four pillars of parental engagement model is aimed at anyone in schools who is responsible for parental engagement, whether that is a head teacher, business manager, the school office team or head of communications or marketing. This book will guide you through the following:

- Understanding what good parental engagement is, based on research and the four pillars of our parental engagement model.
- Identifying how you are doing now, so you can understand where there are gaps and therefore how to define your parental engagement plan.
- Developing activities to close the gaps and achieve your plan, supported by templates and an online toolkit.
- Tracking progress against your plan.

There is much more to be done by all stakeholders, including school leaders, educators, policymakers, thought leaders and government, particularly in our uncertain post-pandemic world where we are likely to see an escalation in virtual over human interaction. Our simple parental engagement model is timeless and acknowledges the advantages and benefits of the digital world. We hope that it helps schools to work in partnership with parents, putting children at the heart of everything. We hope that it helps you and your school to make a positive difference to education.

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Introduction

In this book, we aim to get you to the point where you can have a positive conversation with parents. We want you to create the spark for a common focus with parents at your school and their children. We want you to have a clear plan for achieving long-term and sustainable results, and a shared passion to ensure that pupils can be the very best versions of themselves when they leave your school.

But what does the term ‘parental engagement’ mean? Let us take the easy part first – parental. It simply means relating to a parent or characteristic of a parent. This might be a biological parent or a parental figure, such as a foster parent, family member or other carer. We use ‘parental’ in the broadest sense in this book to recognise parental figures in their many shapes and forms.

Engagement is a little more ambiguous in its definition. It is often misunderstood, which doesn’t help with our ability to achieve this goal. Engagement can be confused with ‘persuading’ people, for example, to participate. Parental engagement is about more than parents showing up at a parents’ evening; simply showing up isn’t quite enough. We need parents to be ‘actively engaged’ throughout their child’s time at school, in the secondary phase as well as primary, which requires us to take things to another level. We believe the best way to explain active engagement is to literally visualise what it looks like in practice.

Imagine you are holding a parents’ evening at the start of a new school year. You have decided to host an online session now that your school and parents are more comfortable with this form of communication. You are slightly nervous about this as you prefer standing in front of a live audience and seeing the whites of their eyes, but you persist. To your delight, you get a great acceptance level of 96% of parents to your email invitation – far higher than ever before.

The evening arrives and nearly everyone who has accepted is online, ready to listen to you and your team. You are raring to go; as you see it, you already have a group of engaged parents ready to get involved in their children’s education. You deliver the session, telling parents about your plans for the year and sharing with them some simple examples of actions they could take to instil good learning habits in their children – for example, you mention some questions they could ask and share a few pictures of positive learning environments. Afterwards, you discuss with your colleagues how well they think the session went. ‘Great, sir’ and ‘You did a good job,

Mrs Richards' are the responses. However, as the year progresses, you hear reports of pupils struggling and Progress 8 scores are below those of previous years. How can this be when you did such a good job of engaging parents early in the first term?

As you are now discovering, being motivated enough to turn up to a parents' evening, whether through a sense of duty or fear, doesn't mean parents are going to be actively engaged. They went away and did not take any of the actions you suggested. Active engagement happens when you find common ground, and this usually starts with listening. How well did you listen to the parents during your virtual parents' evening? Did you ask them beforehand what they wanted to find out about? Or what sort of support they required from you to enable them to better support their own children?

One way to create common ground would be to invite them to the event by email, just like you actually did. However, in addition, you could include an opportunity for them to respond by asking them to state their top, or even top three, challenges regarding supporting their children during the coming year, or their main concerns about their children achieving their goals and being successful. You could ask them to respond directly to you or a colleague by email, or include a link to a simple online survey using a free tool such as Google Forms, or, if you have access to them, a paid platform such as Microsoft Forms, Survey Monkey or via your parent portal. In this way, you can also track their responses, allowing you to follow up with those parents who didn't share their challenges or concerns, thereby really demonstrating your intention to listen to their views.

In preparation for the event, you could review the parent feedback, group it under common headings such as 'time', 'knowledge', 'resistance' and so on, and pick out the key areas. Usually three will suffice, although you may wish to go further if time at the event allows. It is important that you share your analysis of the results with parents, so they all feel they have been heard, even if their concerns did not make the top three that you address. You could then offer some specific practical solutions for each of the main challenges or concerns. You could also consider asking if any parents would like to form a working group to help each other address any of the areas, which is a great way to get them involved and, ultimately, engaged. Finally, be sure to follow up afterwards with some simple and succinct notes or even a personal video.

The impact of active parental engagement on academic outcomes

Despite decades of research confirming that involving families and the community positively contributes to children's academic success, it is still one of the main challenges that many schools, and in particular secondary schools, mention every time they are asked about what difficulties they are facing. According to research conducted with 10,000 students in the United States, parenting is more important than schools in improving academic achievement (Dufur et al., 2013). The researchers compared measures of 'family social capital' and 'school social capital'. Pupils with two involved parents enjoyed school 51% more and achieved higher grades more often than those who didn't have involved parents.

Family social capital included areas such as whether parents checked homework, attended school meetings and events, how much trust they gave their child and how often pupils reported discussing school activities with their parents. School social capital measured a school's ability to serve as a positive environment for learning, and included areas such as pupil participation in extracurricular activities, if the school contacted parents, teacher morale, conflict in school, if teachers responded to individual pupil needs, and an overall measure of the school environment that covered attendance and discipline. It was found that even in schools with low social capital, pupils were more likely to excel if their family social capital scores were high.

Toby Parcel, professor of sociology at North Carolina State University and a co-author of the study, said: 'In part what's going on is that, when the children's parents are engaged in those ways, then the children pick up on it. They think, "School is important. My parents think it's important," and that increases their attachment to education, which translates into better achievement' (Molnar, 2012).

While this is not the only study into the impact of parental engagement on pupil outcomes, it used a significantly large sample and covered a wide range of social circumstances. John Hattie found that 'the effect of parental engagement over a student's school career is equivalent to adding two or three years to that student's education' (quoted in NASBM, 2016: 4). After surveying more than 3,170 pupils and 200 teachers, researchers found that children are more likely to succeed if teachers have positive perceptions of parents (University of Missouri, 2017). This study is interesting as it suggests there is a 'Pygmalion' and 'Golem' effect (Friedrich et al., 2015). The Pygmalion effect refers to the positive influence that expectations can

have on others' performance; the Golem effect has the opposite result, as it reduces self-esteem and performance.

Implications for parental engagement are significant. Having engaged parents from the start, teachers are subconsciously more likely to have confidence in the child and therefore encourage them. Conversely, if the same teacher perceives a child's parents to be disengaged in their education, they are subconsciously likely to project less confidence in that child.

According to Professor Keith Herman of University of Missouri College of Education, 'these findings show the importance of teacher-parent connections and also the need for training teachers on how to create effective relationships with all parents' (University of Missouri, 2017). We believe that it is the second part of Herman's statement that presents the biggest challenge for many secondary schools, because it is an area they simply don't address with any intent. Communicating between school and home is simple compared to the complexity of building trusted relationships. Training is not offered consistently to all potential teachers in the UK, despite the compelling evidence of positive outcomes, which go far beyond happy parents and happy pupils.

A report by the Department for Education and Skills on the impact of parental support on pupil achievement (Desforges and Abouchaa, 2003) concluded that the extent and form of parental involvement is strongly influenced by social class, maternal level of education, maternal psycho-social health, material deprivation, single parent status and, to a lesser degree, family ethnicity. This is important as we believe that active parental engagement does not discriminate. It requires an approach that is inclusive of all parents. The lifestyle choices, career aspirations, self-awareness, ability to adapt to change and community involvement of pupils should not be limited by social class, education, deprivation, mental health, parental status or ethnicity.

A World Economic Forum white paper titled *Resetting the Future of Work Agenda: Disruption and Renewal in a Post-COVID World* (2020) calls for lifelong learning cultures. This aligns strongly with our own research into what parents want, which is more frequent communication and interactions, guided by the parental engagement model.

A pupil perspective

Pupils need a network of people around them, working closely to ensure they are supported in their learning and development, and guided through the ups and downs of growing up. This network should include parents and schools which work in the best interests of the child, communicating regularly so everyone understands the child's needs, interests and concerns in the context of the home environment. This communication should begin when a child starts school, not just when things go wrong.

Many young people are feeling increasingly overwhelmed by our rapidly changing world, which is negatively impacting on their mental health and well-being. Anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide regularly appear in news headlines, and bullying (whether in person or online) is all too common. Social deprivation leaves some children too hungry to learn, potentially pushing them into undesirable ways of life just to survive their peers' and life's pressures. According to a survey from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, young people are also suffering from eco-anxiety – feelings of helplessness, guilt, panic and anger about the fate of the planet (Cuff, 2020).

An Action for Children and YouGov survey in 2019 involving both children and adults revealed that children, parents and grandparents fear that childhood is getting worse. All three generations agreed that bullying (online and offline) was the biggest problem preventing a good childhood. In addition, there was an increased pressure to 'fit in'. Children are worried about poverty and homelessness, closely followed by terrorism. Some children have to take on caring responsibilities for siblings and even parents, who may have mental or physical health issues. With people living longer, they may also have to help with the care of a grandparent.

At the same time, there has been a collapse in investment from the UK government into children's services. The impact on our children is a ticking time bomb and one that schools cannot solve alone. Without the support of parents and the broader community – and, of course, increased funding – the outlook is challenging.

In 2018, the BBC reported that the number of children being home-educated between 2014 and 2017 in the UK had increased by 40% (Issimdar, 2018). This trend has continued, and is likely to do so even after the COVID-19 pandemic has settled, mainly due to mental ill health or other factors, including keeping children at home to avoid potential exclusion due to disruptive classroom behaviour. Parents of children with special educational needs (SEN), in particular, do not feel that they are being supported adequately and are being treated by schools as a problem. This was reiterated in Ofsted's 2017/18 annual report, which expressed concerns

This groundbreaking book promotes parental engagement as a planned, sustained and integral part of a school's approach to improving standards.

Justin Robbins and Karen Dempster describe the challenges of successful parental engagement – encompassing both traditional methods and the use of technology – and examine these challenges through the four pillars of knowledge, environment, culture and communication.

Based on insights gathered from some of the hardest-to-reach parents, this book covers all aspects of the parent–pupil–school relationship and provides a wide-ranging toolkit of practical approaches and strategies that will enable this relationship to thrive.

Suitable for school leaders and leadership teams in both primary and secondary settings.

This carefully researched book makes a significant contribution to the field of parental engagement.

Mary Myatt, education writer, speaker and curator of Myatt & Co

Fizzes with practical advice, packed with research findings and contains fascinating insights from wide-ranging case studies.

Rachel Macfarlane, director of education services, Herts for Learning

I have no doubt that this book will be invaluable to any school seeking the next piece of the school improvement puzzle.

Mark Enser, research lead and head of geography, Heathfield Community College, and co-author of *The CPD Curriculum*

The perfect mix of theory and practice. If you've got parental engagement listed on your school improvement plan, this book will be a blessing.

Dr Pooky Knightsmith, expert on child and adolescent mental health

A must-read for any senior leader.

Dave McPartin, head teacher, Flakefleet Primary School

This book is essential reading for those who want to build on the opportunities that meaningful relationships with parents can bring for all.

Zoe Enser, author and specialist lead adviser for English

Insightful, practical and well researched, *The Four Pillars of Parental Engagement* is a must-read for teachers and school leaders alike.

Chris Wheeler, principal, Monkton Combe School



Justin Robbins and **Karen Dempster** founded Fit2Communicate in 2015. They are highly experienced communication experts, Fellows of the Institute of Internal Communications and certified DISC personality profile practitioners who are passionate about making a difference for future generations. Their unique approach harnesses the power of communication between the school, pupils, parents and local communities. @Fit2Communicate

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