

## Evidence to the Education and Culture Committee's Inquiry into the Attainment Gap: Involvement of parents

### 1. Introduction

Save the Children welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee on how parents and schools can best work together to raise pupil's attainment, as part of the inquiry into the attainment gap. This evidence is informed by Save the Children's work in the last few years to highlight the impact of poverty on children's learning and the need to focus on the achievement gap and our experience of delivering support to families of primary aged children disadvantaged by poverty, including through the delivery of the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme. The evidence also draws on focus groups with parents/ carers of primary aged children living in deprived areas with whom we work.

Parents and carers play a vital role in children's learning and development. We therefore particularly welcome the focus of the inquiry on the role of parents and guardians in helping to improve children's achievement. Parents who take on a supportive role in their children's learning make a difference in improving achievement at all stages of education and learning. Yet, poverty can disadvantage children's learning and impacts on the support parents are able to provide. In order to ensure a comprehensive approach to tackling the achievement gap between children living in poverty and their classmates, developing approaches that support parents disadvantaged by poverty to positively engage in their children's learning is an area that requires increased attention.

### 2. Key messages

Save the Children wish to highlight a number of key themes before concentrating on specific areas of interest to the Committee. To improve support to parents, make progress in closing the achievement gap and raise pupil's achievement the following issues are critical:

- i. **Prioritising parental engagement** – It is important that we have a shared understanding on what we mean by parental involvement and what elements of this make a difference to children's learning. We believe that the focus of policy and support should be *parental engagement - helping parents living on low incomes to use appropriate strategies to support their children's learning at home*. Evidence points to this being the area of parental involvement that can buck the trend for children experiencing poverty and close the attainment gap. Whilst there is an important role for other areas of parental involvement such as parental representation in schools – there is less evidence of the impact of these on closing the gap.
- ii. **Prioritising support for children and families affected by poverty** – A focus on raising attainment for all will not be enough in itself to make progress on tackling the achievement gap. In order to break the link between socio-economic disadvantage and learning outcomes a clear and determined focus on support for this group of children and their families will be required (alongside wider strategies to address the causes of low income).
- iii. **Taking an evidenced based approach** – Evidence can help educators and policy-makers understand how best to support families who are economically disadvantaged in engaging with their children's learning. Interventions should be based on robust research evidence and rigorously monitored to assess whether they are meeting intended outcomes. More attention is needed to identify, promote and invest in support based on what we know works and is most effective. Not using research to develop and evaluate support for parents can waste resources, achieve no improvements or even lead to harmful effects.<sup>i</sup>

### 3. Specific Questions

The remainder of this response will provide evidence in response to the key areas the Committee have requested specific information on.

#### **1. Whether schools always explain clearly to parents how children learn throughout their school years and how parents could help their development (e.g. with reading and wider literacy approaches)**

**When families and schools work together, children do better.** Schools, educators and families recognise the importance of families and schools working together and supporting parents to understand how their children learn. Our research has found that young people also recognise the importance of communications between school and home.<sup>ii</sup> Save the Children believes that it is important that parents understand how children learn throughout their school years as well as how they might help them to develop. This knowledge is critical for parents to be able to support their children to achieve and get on.<sup>iii</sup> Research has shown that children who benefit from sustained, positive, parental *engagement* in their learning at home can achieve well at school, regardless of their family income.<sup>iv</sup>

**The types of information and support offered to parents are important.** It is difficult to assess whether schools always explain clearly to parents how children learn and the role parents and carers can play as there are so many different approaches used within and between local areas and schools. From our experience of working in deprived areas, we find that the way in which schools support parents in this respect is working well in some schools and for some parents. However, we are also aware that schools are not always supporting parents as effectively as they could, particularly in the most deprived areas. There are significant inconsistencies within and between schools. There are also a number of factors that can act as barriers, discourage or inhibit parents' involvement in their children's education and contact with the school, for example parents' own experience of school education may have been negative and this may undermine their confidence to engage with the school or simply parents had different learning experiences.

**The experience of parents of primary aged children living in deprived areas that we work with highlight a number of challenges for ensuring that parents are supported effectively:**

- **Parents lack understanding of how to support learning at home:** Parents feel they lack the skills and knowledge to help their child to catch-up or progress. They can feel confused by homework tasks and unsure about their role in supporting their completion. They are particularly concerned that they do not understand the methods they should be using to support their child's learning effectively.
- **Parents do not feel they know enough about how their child is achieving:** Parent's evenings and annual progress reports are common ways in which information about children's progress are communicated to parents. These events are felt to be too infrequent (often annually) and too short to provide the level of detail parents need. They feel that specific issues with children's development are often identified by schools without providing guidance for parents on how to address them.
- **Parents are devising their own strategies in the absence of appropriate support:** Parents often describe having to create their own ways of helping their children complete work at home, for example when learning to read and write. Many parents also sought support from one another to work through challenges and problems – seeking guidance from other parents who were facing the same difficulties. These strategies can be helpful, however, they can also provide conflicting messages and less effective support for children to get on and improve.

**In addition, parents identified examples of the type of practical support they would find helpful:**

- **Opportunities for in-school observation** e.g. through parents watching lessons as they happen in school.
- **Coaching on how to support learning at home** e.g. access to programmes that focus on using appropriate tools and learning techniques.
- **Instructions accompanying homework.** e.g. providing information on the purpose of tasks and tips on how to support children to complete them.
- **Regular snapshots of children's progress and areas for improvement** e.g. portfolios from school including detailed examples of work and comments from teachers on key areas. This type of profile was felt to be more readily available in nurseries.

**We are beginning to understand the key ingredients of successful approaches to support parents to engage effectively in their child's learning.** Evaluations suggest that the most important factor is good communication between parents and professionals.<sup>v</sup> Education authorities and schools need to ensure that their home-school communication arrangements are appropriate for all parents. Parents can build knowledge and skills when time is taken to discuss their child's learning and development with practitioners. The Education Endowment Foundation has found that the most effective strategies in schools in England focus on guiding parents with the small, practical steps they can take at home to boost their child's learning.<sup>vi</sup> Support is ideally delivered by trained professionals and focuses on the ways in which children learn and are taught at school (JRF 2014). Our experience of delivering the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme also suggests that play-based methods can help families 'model' behaviours and replicate effective activities at home.<sup>vii</sup> *We urge the committee to examine how consistently the existing evidence base is being used to inform the ways in which schools are engaging and developing support for families in poverty.*

## **2. Whether schools are always flexible enough to allow parents to be involved in their child's education (given parents' work commitments, for example)**

**The way support is provided is key to effectively engaging parents' living in poverty in their child's learning** (ENQIN 2010). There is a lack of information at national level about how schools are *engaging* with parents and whether this is done flexibly. We recognise that schools are under considerable pressure to support diverse groups of parents and the challenges in providing support in a way that suits all families. Schools do an admirable job in fostering learning and achievement for the majority of children in Scotland. However, many families are not receiving the support they need, in the right ways. Ensuring parents have access to appropriate support, at the times and in the ways they need it is essential to help to close the attainment gap.<sup>viii</sup>

**Many parents we work with say they need greater flexibility in the support they receive from schools.** Schools must take increased account of the circumstances of low income parents. Low income working parents often work longer hours, work outside normal working hours and/ or have inconsistent work patterns. This can create practical barriers to engaging with their child's education. Balancing work and childcare can also be an issue, especially for lone parent households. Parents of primary school children living in deprived areas told us that resources and support schools have to offer are not always available to families at the times they need it. Parents describe some schools that are unwilling or unable to find alternative times to meet with parents who can not attend important events within the school, such as parents' evenings as a result of evening/inflexible work patterns. Parents also feel that schools and teachers can lack an understanding of the realities of living on a low income and families' circumstances at home which can lead to less

positive relationships or inappropriate support being provided. Parents can feel stigmatised and therefore less likely to engage with schools. Parents with low literacy levels may also find it difficult to engage (and they may be unwilling to disclose this) with schools and require communication and support in different ways.

**Save the Children believe that flexible support for parents to engage in their child's education should be part of the mainstream of Scottish education.**

Evidence from England about what works in this regard, suggests that this means having high expectations of parents and building their confidence and engagement with schools, for example by supporting them to address wider family needs, meeting them on neutral ground (at home or outside school) and finding creative ways of engaging with parents.<sup>ix</sup> Practical suggestions from parents include one-to-one meetings as a regular part of parent-teacher communication and group support e.g. through opening school facilities for longer hours and providing spaces for parents to help children complete homework. The Early Learning Partnership Parental Engagement Group (ELPPEG) in England points out the risks when schools rely on a limited number of sessions with parents, using set formulae to 'change' parents over a short period of time.<sup>x</sup> We believe that effective strategies for parental engagement should be built-in to the way in which schools support children across every aspect of the curriculum and school life. There are examples of innovative approaches that can be effective in Scotland.<sup>xi</sup> However, it is unclear how consistently these are replicated across the school system. *We suggest the committee examine this in more detail. We believe that examples that are working well for children must be made more widely available.*

**3. The extent to which schools offer particular support to the parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities, in order to improve the attainment of those pupils**

**Families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are as likely – sometimes more so – to be involved in their child's learning.** However, their efforts are likely to be less effective; especially when they have low educational attainment themselves (JRF 2014). Income poverty significantly disadvantages children's learning and impacts on the support parents are able to provide at home. This can be because they have fewer resources to invest in their child's learning at home and to support the costs of school and/or because of the impact of stress on the time and attention they can dedicate to these activities.<sup>xii</sup> The importance of access to and quality of support for this group of families is therefore important. Parental involvement that does not effectively reach all families has the potential to widen gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their better off peers.

**Our experience is that coverage and quality of additional support for parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities to help improve their child's attainment is variable.** This is based on our experience of delivering the FAST programme in schools in some of the most deprived areas in Scotland. Initiatives are often driven by short term funding priorities and not joined up for families across their child's education. There is also inconsistency in using approaches based on the evidence of what works. It is our experience that delivery of effective support for low income families is best achieved when this is a clear strategic priority at local authority level.

**Save the Children believes that a priority should be to ensure that all parents experiencing poverty have access to support that helps them to engage in their child's learning, should they need it.** Effective parental engagement in children's learning can help to buck the trend for children experiencing poverty and close the attainment gap. There has been a tendency for schools to introduce 'parenting programmes' to provide better opportunities for support. These typically provide more structured support for families and are provided by partners, often in the third sector. Evidence shows

these can be effective at helping to close the achievement gap (JRF 2014). However, they are only reaching small numbers of children and families who can benefit. Other approaches that have been tried include identifying a lead professional in every local authority or school to take forward parental *engagement* work. This has tended to focus on building connections between homes and schools to improve communication. Our experience of delivering the FAST programme highlights the benefits of developing multiagency approaches within schools to break down barriers between school and home, through running sessions after school, in the school building using fun, interactive activities.

**There is emerging evidence of the specific strategies that can have an impact on the achievement gap (JRF 2014).** There are also examples of how this is being provided effectively in some places and individual schools. Whilst we welcome this, there is a need to better understand which approaches are working - and how consistently they are being made available (more detail on these points is provided in response to question 4). There are practical challenges to overcome in ensuring the success of approaches that have been shown to work. For example, with recruiting parents to interventions and keeping them *engaged*. This can be a particular issue in deprived areas and for parents experiencing poverty.<sup>xiii</sup>

#### **4. Whether there is evidence to demonstrate which approaches used by schools have been most successful and whether these are being used, as appropriate, throughout Scotland**

**Evidence shows that increasing parental engagement can help to close the achievement gap (JRF 2014).** The Education Endowment Foundation finds that parental engagement programmes have led to around five additional months' progress in a child's early development over the course of a year. Two recent meta-analyses from the USA have also suggested that increasing parental involvement in primary and secondary schools had an average of 2-3 months positive impact.<sup>xiv</sup> Whilst we know it is important, far less is known about how to increase parental engagement, particularly in low income communities. Many of the highest quality studies are from the USA,<sup>xv</sup> which suggests a need to look beyond Scotland for evidence of what works.

**The most successful strategies focus on giving parents strategies to support children's learning - based on the way children learn and are taught at school.** This includes effective strategies to tutor children, making space for completing homework and sharing enjoyable books. Successful interventions have also been shown to use qualified practitioners to deliver this support; run in group based settings and run for a longer duration. Support is also strengthened when multiple strategies are combined including a mix of universal and targeted support. A number of studies have identified the positive impact of encouraging parents to talk with their children as well as developing parents own skills. There is growing evidence of specific programmes that can have impact (see Education Endowment Foundation). A study in England argued that schools performing well for disadvantaged students have a 'common mind-set' - one in which leaders use evidence carefully, look beyond their local context, seek to compare themselves to the best and be ambitious in how they define success. While this report is based on schools in England, Save the Children believe that the findings should be considered in the Scottish context.<sup>xvi</sup>

**The Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme has growing evidence and recognition of success in Scotland.** FAST is an award-winning, UN-endorsed, evidence based programme that brings together parents, children, teachers and the wider community. It supports families by helping children improve their skills in reading, writing and maths; helping parents get more involved in their child's education so that they can

support learning and development at home and encouraging stronger bonds between parents and their child, their child's school, other parents and the wider community.

**The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014) highlights FAST as an example of a programme that is showing promise in the Scottish context.** It has a number of advantages. It is voluntary with high retention rates - 77% of families complete FAST in Scotland, a particularly high rate compared to other programmes. It reaches large number of disadvantaged children and families – up to 40 families per cycle. It strengthens relationships within and between families and breaks down the barriers between home and school – 20% increase in parental involvement. It is rigorously monitored. Save the Children has been supporting delivery of FAST in Scotland since 2010. Between 2010 and 2014, FAST in Scotland has been delivered to 1,316 families and 2,399 children.

**Research and evidence data are not being routinely used in Scotland to guide policies and approaches to close the gap (JRF 2014).** There is increasing recognition and awareness of evidenced based programmes in Scotland. However, we are concerned about the extent to which these are used to inform practice and interventions in schools. Programmes and approaches used in schools can lack a robust research basis and are not properly evaluated for their impact on children's outcomes.<sup>xvii</sup> The Scottish Government has developed a specific online resource to support consistent application of evidence based practice.<sup>xviii</sup> We suggest that the Committee examines how this is being used at local level. In particular, we urge the Committee to look at how evidence is being embedded as part of initiatives taken forward through the Scottish Government's Raising Attainment for All initiative. This involves twenty three local authorities and includes a specific focus on testing practice interventions to support parental involvement and close the attainment gap.

## **5. Whether greater parental involvement in school education through the Parental Involvement Act (2006) has led to an improvement in pupil attainment**

**The impact of the Parental Involvement Act on children's attainment has not been thoroughly assessed in Scotland.** The Act gives parents the right to be more involved in their children's learning and makes local authorities responsible for promoting – but not for supporting - parental involvement in learning at home. Save the Children is not aware of any recent evaluation of the impact of this legislation on children's attainment.

**Whilst there is a role for wider parental involvement, we believe that support for parents to engage in their child's education is more important for closing the gap.** Evidence shows that simple activities parents do with their children such as reading and sharing stories, helping children with homework and even speaking to a child about what they have learnt at school can improve children's outcomes and help to reduce the impact of poverty on children's attainment (JRF 2014). There is general consensus that this kind of *engagement* in children's learning has greater benefits than parents' involvement in other aspects of school life (such as volunteering in a classroom, fundraising, joining parent-teacher councils or inputting into school governance and decision-making).<sup>xix</sup> This is not to say these activities are not valuable but that engagement in learning at home has higher impact. There is currently no statutory requirement or guidance for parental engagement support to be made available for parents. However there is an explicit commitment in the National Parenting Strategy to deliver support for parents experiencing poverty to *engage* in their child's education. *We urge the Committee to consider the extent to which this measure has been implemented at local level and what impact delivery can have on closing the attainment gap.*

**6. Whether there are any new measures that could realistically be taken (for example, by the Scottish Government, local authorities, parents' forums, the voluntary sector etc.) to help parents raise their child's attainment**

To help make progress in closing the achievement gap, we believe that measures in Scotland must focus on providing improved support for low income parents to *engage* in their child's learning. Save the Children recommends:

**Scottish Government:**

- **Consider how to ensure that families living in poverty can access evidence based parental engagement support:** parents should have the right to access support to help them engage effectively in their child's education.
- **Produce national standards on parental engagement support:** this should provide a clear definition; identify the most effective practice and help promote information about what works to those commissioning services.
- **Improve training on using what works:** training and continuing professional development opportunities should build knowledge and understanding of what works and develop skills and capacity on using evidence data. It could also focus on how to conduct effective monitoring and evaluation.

**Education Scotland:**

- **Strengthen inspection and improvement:** we believe that increased accountability is required to help close the gap. Inspection processes should examine the support education settings (with a focus on primary schools) are providing for parents from low income families to *engage* in their child's learning and how evidence is being used to inform strategies e.g. through Journey to Excellence and How Good is Our School evaluation frameworks.

**Local Government:**

- **Audit existing strategies and approaches:** this should look at what is in place already at local level to support parental *engagement*, identify good practice and assess any gaps.
- **Provide poverty awareness training:** staff recruitment and initial training, induction procedures and continuing professional development should seek to increase understanding of the impact of living in a low income household on children's learning at home and at school and the ways in which schools can support this group of children. This is particularly important in schools with lower numbers of children living in poverty e.g. where poverty is more hidden.

**Schools:**

- **Audit and implement strategies for engaging with parents experiencing poverty:** as part of continuous improvement schools should identify children experiencing poverty in their school, examine how families of these children are engaging with the school and their child's learning and seek to identify how processes could be improved, including through consultation with parents.

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<sup>i</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2013) *What do rigorous evaluations tell us about the most promising parental involvement interventions?: A critical Review of what works for disadvantaged children in different age groups*

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- <sup>ii</sup> Save the Children and Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (2014) *Learning Lessons*.
- <sup>iii</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014) *Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education*.
- <sup>iv</sup> Wilder, S (2014) *Effects of parental involvement on academic achievement: a meta-synthesis*. Educational Review, Vol. 66.3
- <sup>v</sup> Early National Quality Improvement Network (2010) *Principles for Engaging with Families: A framework for local authorities and national organisations to evaluate and improve engagement with families*.
- <sup>vi</sup> Davis H, Day C and Bidmead, C (2002) *Working in Partnership with Parents: The Parent Advisor Model*.
- <sup>vii</sup> [www.familiesandschoolstogether.com](http://www.familiesandschoolstogether.com)
- <sup>viii</sup> Desfourges, C and Abouchaar, A (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustments: A literature review*. Research Report number 433. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- <sup>ix</sup> Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) *Cracking the code: how schools can improve social mobility*
- <sup>x</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2013) *What do rigorous evaluations tell us about the most promising parental involvement interventions?: A critical Review of what works for disadvantaged children in different age groups*.
- <sup>xi</sup> See [www.engagingwithfamilies.co.uk](http://www.engagingwithfamilies.co.uk)
- <sup>xii</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) *The Relationship Between Parenting and Poverty*
- <sup>xiii</sup> Whittaker, K. A. & Cowley, S (2012) *A Survey of Parental Self-Efficacy Experiences: Maximising Potential Through Health Visiting and Universal Parenting Support*. Journal of Clinical Nursing, 21: 3276-86.
- <sup>xiv</sup> The Education Endowment Foundation Early Years Toolkit  
<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/early-years/parental-engagement/>
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) *Cracking the code: how schools can improve social mobility*
- <sup>xvii</sup> Goodman, A. Gregg, P. (2010) *Poorer Children's Educational Attainment: How important are attitudes and behaviour?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- <sup>xviii</sup> [www.engagingwithfamilies.co.uk](http://www.engagingwithfamilies.co.uk)
- <sup>xix</sup> General Teaching Council for England. *Parental Involvement in Children's Learning*.