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ENGAGING PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR



A summary of a roundtable
conversation

Forward

The following material is a summary of a roundtable conversation discussing some of the issues around encouraging positive relationships between schools and parents of children with challenging behaviour. It is not intended to be a final solution but to provide suggestions for possible actions and encourage wider debate.

Huge thanks go to those who participated in the discussion. If you wish to participate in similar conversations then make sure to follow @edroundtables on Twitter.

The conversation took place on 6th February 2020 between a number of educational professionals and focused on one case study, references to individual children, teachers and schools were not made or disclosed. Roundtable conversations are anonymous and confidential with only general outcomes being shared.



Context

In this case the focus was on the issues experienced by one primary school teacher in engaging the parents of a child who exhibited extremely challenging behaviour in an alternative provision primary setting.

It was noted that parents didn't attend open afternoons, respond to letters or want to attend the school at all. There were a number of external agencies involved with the family.

The discussion was broad and covered a number of areas, a number of which are covered in this document.

I have tried to organise the ideas and comments into a more coherent piece than the original transcript and hope that you enjoy reading it.

I apologise to any of those involved if I have misunderstood any of the conversation, these mistakes are mine – don't hesitate to offer clarification.

Ben Brown

@edroundtables

www.edrt.co.uk

I have divided the outcomes into four main sections for you all to dip into and consider.

The school, the teacher, the parent and other agencies.



The School

All schools have to communicate with their parents and carers. The level of communication seems to change a great deal as pupils move through their education from primary, where communication seems to be constant and varied, to secondary, where communication appears to be virtually non-existent by comparison.

There are a number of reasons for this change. In Key Stage 1, parents are taking their children into the school, they are communicating with teachers directly and with each other on a daily basis. Communication is constant and the school gate is a community hub in many ways.

As children progress into Key Stage 2, children are given more responsibilities and may be walking themselves home. Parents and carers are less present at the school gate and

communication by letter, text, website and phone become more common.

One thing that is still consistent, is the class teacher, who knows the children much better because they are with them all day for all subjects and as a result there is usually only 1 or 2 points of contact.

By the time children are at secondary school, the relationship between parents, carers and the school community has changed. Parents and carers are no longer at the gate, longer distance communication is the norm and teachers teach a much larger demographic of students, there is a much greater distance between the school and the family.

School communication with all parents can remove some of the barriers of communicating with parents of children who exhibit challenging behaviour.

If high quality school communication is the norm then there is a greater chance that those parents that are hard to reach will be reached.

However, there are some caveats to this.



Are we speaking their language?

There is nothing worse than trying to wade through hard to understand jargon. Teacher Talk is hard to understand jargon.

Tabloid newspapers have a wide audience because they communicate to their core demographic in words that they use and understand. Schools should be doing the same.



Are we contacting them via the method that they want to be contacted?

We all have our favourite methods of communication and we tend to respond better to these than we do others. In the modern era are letters still the best way to communicate with parents and carers?

Some may question the use of social media platforms for official communication, but if a parent or carer uses Twitter, Facebook Messenger or Whatsapp as their main method of contacting the outside world, shouldn't schools explore the possibilities of using these to build more positive relationships.



What should we be sharing with parents?

Schools generate a huge amount of information, the stack of letters that arrived on my desk each week was only one part of it.

But do we know what parents really want to know about? What do they need to know that would improve relationships between them and the school?

Often, the communication stream is very broad and asks parents to do many things. School is only one part of a parent's life. Instead of demanding that they do things, perhaps a diet of information that puts them into the mindset of wanting to do things for the school would be more appropriate.

Offer parents the information that they value, nurture them into a school fan club. This will rub off onto the wider community and make conversations with the "hard to reach" parents much easier because their wider community will be singing the school's praises already.

Do all of this from the moment they enter the school – before they become "hard to reach".



The Parent(s) & Carer(s)

Not all families are the same. The family dynamics are important to know. Who is most receptive to the messages that you want to send out? What do you know about the family?



Parents are humans too, they have their own struggles

The key thing to remember is that parents of children with challenging behaviour are often struggling too. For some it may be that school is a respite for them.

Anecdotally, many teachers will tell you that the most challenging children are often the “healthiest” and are in school come rain or shine. They may bemoan this, but as education professionals we need to consider what other issues a parent or family is dealing with that is impacting their ability to cope.

Mental health issues, drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence, poverty, unemployment, bereavement, illness or disability to name but a few may all be playing their part.

But this doesn't mean that parents don't care. It just means they, like us, have a lot to deal with and they may not be dealing with it all very well.

Don't add to that burden.



Don't play the Blame Game

Parents and carers are often the butt of the blame game. If something has gone wrong it must be their fault.

“They must be doing it all wrong, such terrible parents.”

Parents and carers may feel the same way if there isn't a good relationship between them and the school. The school becomes their focus, possibly even the teachers.

“They are picking on my child. The teacher is a bully who doesn't understand my child's needs.”

Neither of these positions serves the child well. We all need to remember that we are on the same side.

As educational professionals we have to take the lead in these situations and sit on the same side of the table.



Is school a stressful place for your parents and carers?

Do you know what a parent's personal experience of school was? How do they feel about engaging with school?

Although our school days are said to be the best days of our lives, this is often not the case.

For many parents and carers who don't engage with the school, the truth may be that school does not hold fond memories for them. Some of them may even have hated it. As a result, their view of school may be tarnished by their previous experiences.

Do you hold all your meetings at the school? If so, consider the impact of this on the mental attitude and health of the parents you want to engage.

Changing the location can change the power dynamic. A neutral location could lend itself to a partnership, instead of inviting one party on to the "territory" of the other.



What do parents and carers really care about?

Generally speaking, and I am aware of sweeping generalisations, most parents

want to know that their child is happy, loved and kind.

There is of course more to this simplistic answer, but if we start with that basis, then communication with parents should be from a position where you show that you care about the child.

If the school shows that they know the child, that they care about the child and that they want the child to be happy, then they are standing on the same side of the table as the parents and carers and, more importantly the parents and carers know it.



The Teacher

Because the focus of the roundtable was on parents of children with challenging behaviour, the teacher plays an important role in communication and engagement with the parents.

The conversation also raised well-being issues that aren't covered here. These can severely impact the ability of the teacher to address issues appropriately. This is not the fault of the teacher, but could be a sign of wider issues that need addressing.

It was noted that social workers working with difficult cases get weekly supervision with their line managers to discuss issues that they may be dealing with. Teachers don't get this as a matter of course.



Be curious about their child

One of the barriers to engagement and communication is that the child and their behaviour can become merged. When teachers engage with parents, there is a real danger that they focus on the behaviour of the child rather than the child themselves.

Instead, engaging in conversation about the child and asking about them shows that there is a common interest in the child. There is common ground for all to start sharing stories about the child.

Stories, for example, are a great way of exploring the triggers for challenging behaviour without blaming anyone – as long as you are talking about the child and not the behaviour.



Script your most difficult conversations.

By being really clear what you want the outcome to be and writing down key phrases that express your thoughts you can go some way to making the conversation less difficult.

However, do be aware that you are only contributing 50% of the conversation and the reason the conversation is likely to be difficult is that you don't know the other person well. So, don't over plan and avoid the conversation altogether.

The aim of these conversations is not to manipulate the other participant, but to make sure that you are clear about what you want to say.

Don't go in to the meeting clutching a piece of paper to read from, practice saying what you want to say out loud and get the message down to its essence.

Be respectful and then listen.

You are there to understand and be part of the conversation.

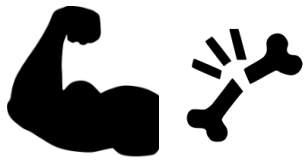


Are you delivering only negative messages?

Negative messages about behaviour can often become the overwhelming type of message.

As teachers, we want to make sure that poor behaviour is challenged and addressed. We tend to make time for the negative phone calls. It may even be part of the behaviour policy that there is a phone call home.

Simply by making time for positive phone calls or messages to parents can offset the negativity. Ideally, there should be more positive messaging than negative messaging.



Strengths and weaknesses.

Parents and carers are more willing to accept negative messaging if they know that you know their child's strengths and weaknesses.

Although this does seem a little repetitive – knowing the whole child and talking about them more often than the behaviour allows you to address the behaviour with the parent.

It allows you to engage with the parent and carer.



Other Agencies

Children with specific needs or exhibiting challenging behaviour are often have a range of other agencies involved.

At review meetings the number of people sat around a table to discuss the child's needs can be overwhelming for the family.

They may not want to open up and engage as fully as they would like.

Yes, agencies do need to have a voice or be aware of what else is happening around a child but is there a better way to hold these meetings without the wall of professionals?





Conclusion

If schools have a wide range of communication channels that they use to keep parents informed and nurture relationships parents may not become “disengaged”.

Key to this is knowing the parents – their situation and their family dynamic. Knowing what they want, what they need and what they are able to cope with.

The child is at the centre of the relationship between the school and the parent.

Losing sight of the child in a sea of negative comments about behaviour damages relationships.

Knowing the child’s strengths and weaknesses and demonstrating that you care about their happiness builds trust between the school and parents.

Although teachers are often the first point of contact, they are human too and need to be supported.

Both the school and the family should be on the same side, not fighting over the child.

It is not anyone’s fault – the parents are not to blame. The

teachers are not to blame. The school is not to blame.

As soon as anyone is blamed, conversation, communication and engagement become so much harder.

Hopefully, some of the ideas and thoughts suggested in the conversation will encourage reflection on actions and practise and increase engagement with parents and improve outcomes for children.

Constructive feedback is welcomed.

If you have had experiences of the issues discussed and have found potential solutions, then get in touch @edroundtables on Twitter.

If you have an educational topic you would like to discuss with your peers in a confidential space. Then contact @edroundtables or visit www.edrt.co.uk

Ben Brown

