

MODULE 3.1

MEETING PARENTS' INFORMATION NEEDS

Table of contents

Objectives	3
Outcomes	3
Key messages	4
The importance of family to student mental health and wellbeing	5
The challenges of parenting	6
What information are parents looking for?	7
Adolescent behaviours	7
Family relationships	8
Worries related to the parenting experience	8
Supports currently accessed	10
Schools as a source of information support for parents	11
Benefits of engaging and supporting families	12
Benefits for the student	12
Benefits for families	12
Benefits for staff	12
What does parental engagement look like?	13
Whole school approach to providing parenting information and reducing mental health stigma	14
Communication strategy	15
Planning considerations	15
Information gathering considerations	17
Engagement and information dissemination opportunities	18
Exploring new methods of communication	20
Review communication processes and policies	21
Disseminating information – School examples	22
References and key readings	24

Meeting parents' information needs

Objectives

- Schools provide parents with regular information about youth development, emerging youth mental health issues and effective parenting strategies.
- Schools actively promote available programs and services that support the mental health and wellbeing needs of students and families.

Outcomes

School leadership, student wellbeing and MindMatters Action Team:

- determine the most appropriate sources of information about youth development and mental health
- determine the most appropriate sources of information about wellbeing and emerging youth mental health issues, as well as approaches to effective parenting
- school leadership has an understanding of the importance of getting to know the parents' information needs, how they can gain this understanding and how they can use this information.

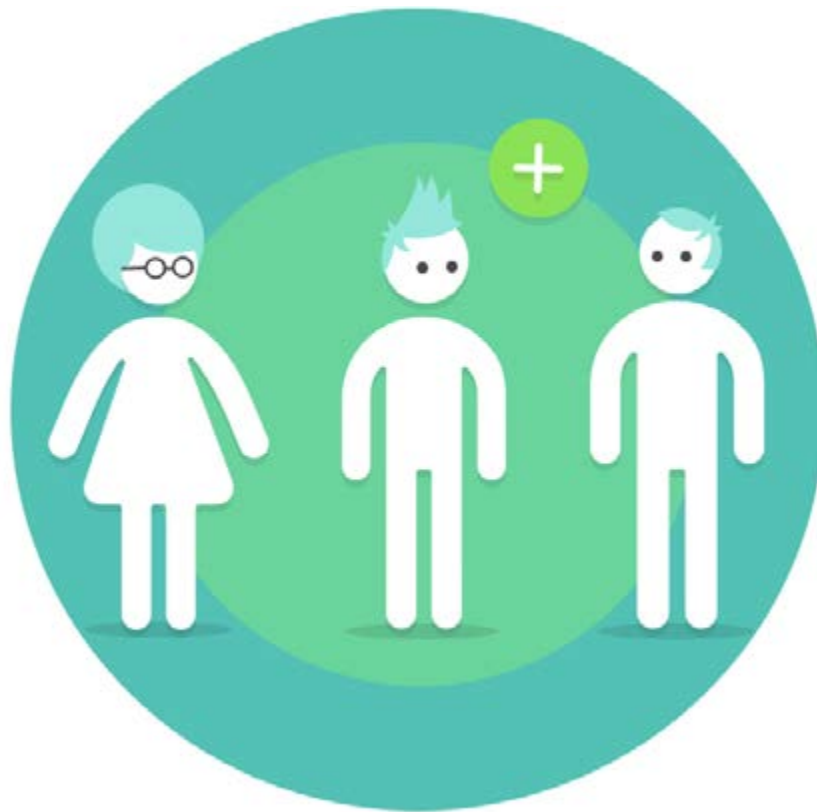
All staff:

- believe the school has a role in supporting parents to access information on youth development, mental health and wellbeing
- enhance understanding of each staff member's role in supporting parents by providing information and the knowledge of how to access further relevant information
- increase awareness of the typical issues of concern to parents, and the school's role in supporting parents.

Key messages

- Parents, carers and families play a significant role in the lives of young people and are likely to have a range of worries about the young person's development, mental health and wellbeing.
- Understanding the information needs of the parent community, and effective vehicles for communicating with them, is a key starting point to building supportive relationships.
- Schools can engage parents, carers and families in a number of ways that would help them access information or support when needed.
- A school community that is empathic and non-judgemental will make it easier for parents to access information and support when unsure or worried about their child.
- A whole school planned approach to communicating with parents, carers and families is most likely to be effective in supporting the needs of families.

The importance of family to student mental health and wellbeing



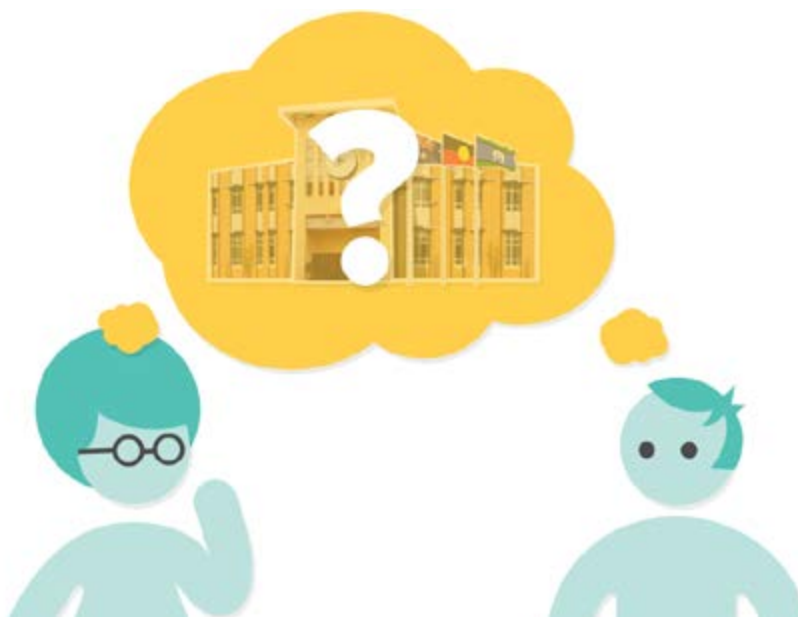
Family is important to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Research shows that young people who experience a nurturing environment and are provided with emotional, social and physical support are most likely to experience positive wellbeing and reach their full potential (Allen & Smith, 2008). The parenting role can be considered to serve a number of purposes, including:

- providing children and young people with basic care
- protecting them from harm
- loving and nurturing them
- helping them to develop the skills they will need to participate fully in society as adults.

Parents achieve these goals in various ways, taking into account their own personal history, cultural backgrounds, and the personal qualities of their children.

The challenges of parenting

The transition to adolescence involves significant changes for young people as well as their parents and carers. New parenting demands require parents and carers to adapt their parenting. Many parents and carers are able to do this well, but for some the young person's striving for autonomy can be seen as disobedience or rejection.



As part of the renegotiation of the parent-adolescent relationship, parents may be uncertain about their role with secondary schools. They may also be busy and not have a lot of time to be involved, compared to when their children were younger. Despite these changes, parents will still be interested in the wellbeing and learning outcomes for their teenagers, and may see the school as a place of support for them when it is offered in a non-stigmatising and respectful manner.

What information are parents looking for?

It is evident from blogs and forums that parents of teenagers look for support about a vast range of topic areas, particularly topics that relate to the changes associated with puberty and their changing relationship. Broadly speaking, parents of teenagers can be concerned about their teenager's development and behaviour, as well as their own experience of parenting teenagers. A review of the Raising Children Network forum (<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>) for parents of young teenagers, and the The Kids Are All Right blog (<http://www.thekidsareallright.com.au/>), reveal a range of topics of concern, which obviously vary depending upon the age of the young person. Topics of worries include:

Adolescent behaviours

- mood and behaviour changes – and whether they are normal adolescence or signs of an emerging mental health issue
- peer pressure, conflict with peers
- inappropriate or unsafe use of technology, such as mobile phones, video games and the internet, including worries around exposure to inappropriate content or cyberbullying
- body image issues, including eating, exercise, hair and makeup, clothes (brands)
- sexual behaviours, including decisions around contraception
- alcohol and drug use, including decisions around parent responses and supervision
- disengaging from family and spending more times with friends
- teenage parties, particularly supervision arrangements and contact with other families.





Family relationships

- conflict within the family, often related to day to day situations such as tidiness of bedrooms and household chores.
- sibling conflict or rivalry
- tensions between parental expectations of young people to spend time with family when they may prefer to spend time with peers
- supervision – when should young people be left alone and for how long?
- developing and maintaining trust, particularly when parents view behaviours as breaching trust or lying or stealing has occurred
- effects of family breakdown.

Worries related to the parenting experience

- letting go – knowing when and how to
- managing the young person's need for independence with dependence
- worries around being a 'good parent'
- balancing own needs and those of family (e.g. work outside of the home, extended family commitments)
- grief associated with the changes of adolescence (for example, "my child is growing up so quickly I feel like I don't know him anymore")
- confronting parents' own worries about adolescence based on their own experiences
- coping with parents' own mental health and wellbeing needs
- parenting style – finding that what worked with younger children may not work with adolescents and finding that what worked with one child may not work with the others
- setting boundaries and finding best ways to discipline
- knowing when to be concerned about adolescents' behaviour and attitude (what are the signs of depression or other mental health difficulties?).

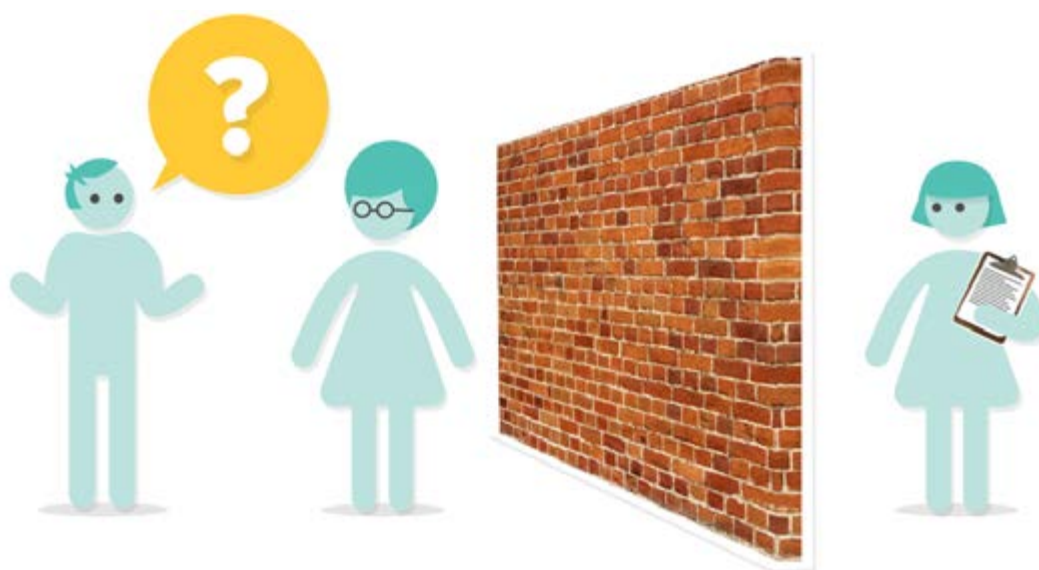


For parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly migrant and refugee families, a range of additional worries can also be present including:

- uncertainty about changes in family roles following migration
- varied knowledge of the Australian education system and how schools operate
- fears about children's safety
- effect of traumatic experiences for young people and parents
- unmet expectations
- loss of parental confidence
- diverse and disrupted family structures
- perceived loss of culture.

Barriers to parental information and support

- **Lack of knowledge of how to access information or services**
Parents often do not know where to go to access information or services when worried about their child or family.
- **Limited information**
While many parents would like information as their children move into the adolescent years, much of the available information is focused on infants or young children.
- **Limited access to parenting services and programs**
The availability of formal support for parents can be patchy, with some programs and services supporting parents operating locally or infrequently.



Supports currently accessed



Website information

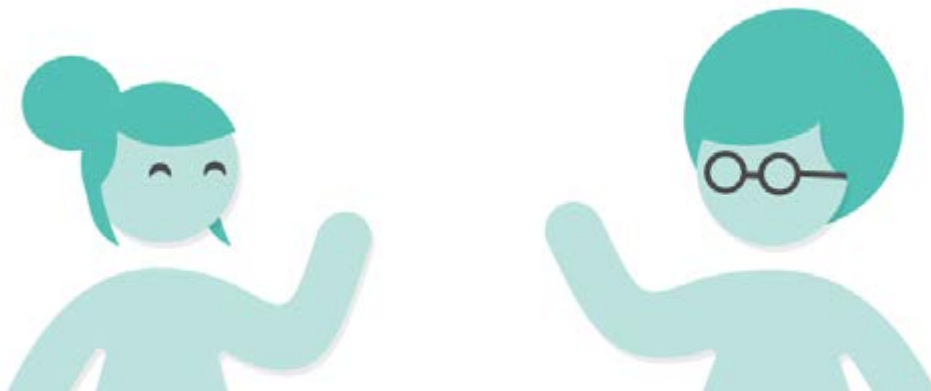
A number of websites provide general information and tips for parents and carers of young people (for example, Raising Children Network).

Online communities

Increasingly, access to support through online communities is being utilised by parents as a source of support and information (for example, The Kids Are All Right).

Other parents

Parents often seek support from other parents. School communities have historically provided the means for parents to establish connections with other parents.



Formal parenting programs

One source of support can be formal parenting programs, such as Tuning into Teens (<http://www.tuningintokids.org.au/>) or Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) (<http://www.triplep-parenting.net/glo-en/triple-p/positive-parenting-program/>). Research has shown that for parenting programs to be effective they must be developmentally timed to be relevant to the parents' needs (Allen & Smith, 2008).

Schools as a source of information support for parents



Schools play a prominent role in Australian communities and have significant reach. Given this prominence and the relationships they develop with parents, schools are well placed to facilitate access to information and services that can support students, parents and families. Parents may not be linked to other institutions in the community, so could look to the school for support to find and use these institutions or connect with other parents.

The school provides a useful starting point for parents seeking information.

Benefits of engaging and supporting families

Parental engagement is important because parents play a significant role in the lives of young people. Research suggests that parental engagement with school is related to student achievement, as well as student wellbeing (Cox, 2005).

Although some effort is required to engage parents, such as planning, gathering information, preparing staff and promoting the school as a place of support, the benefits of this work are significant.

Benefits for the student

Students benefit when school staff and families are engaged in their education and communicating regularly, particularly if they have specific needs.

Benefits for families

Some parents may be struggling with the parenting role and may welcome the school as a place to obtain information support and understanding. It may also help them to connect with other parents in their community experiencing similar challenges and to obtain emotional support.

Benefits for staff

School staff will achieve greater success in their role as educators if parents are engaged and working in partnership with them. With good parent relationships, school staff will be better placed to raise any concerns when worried about a student.



Given the increasing independence of young people, it is important for them to be considered in any interactions between school staff and parents. Keeping the young person's needs in focus shares the responsibility for their education and wellbeing between the young person, school and family. This takes skill beyond that of communicating with family, as it requires understanding of clear boundaries between the young person, family, and school and an ability to keep the young person front of mind.

What does parental engagement look like?



Parental engagement can look like many different things depending upon the school community, but could include the following:

- lots of parents attend events
- parents read newsletters, emails, text messages and facebook posts
- parents complete surveys and respond to requests
- parents work collaboratively with the school when concerned about their child
- parents look to the school community as a source of support during challenging times
- parents and teachers communicate well and are comfortable with each other
- parents offer ideas, strategies and contributions for developing a positive school community
- there is a lot of interest from parents in joining planning groups addressing mental health and wellbeing within the school community.

Whole school approach to providing parenting information and reducing mental health stigma

A whole school approach to providing parents with information, support and understanding will help parents and carers to feel comfortable seeking support from the school. Aspects that are important for parents and students when seeking support within the school include:

- feeling a sense of trust that any concern will be treated seriously and with respect
- an existing relationship where teachers and parents feel mutually supported
- confidentiality being maintained about any discussions that take place
- cultural aspects being respected and considered in responses.



The transition periods into and out of secondary school, as well as between year levels, are often key times of engagement for parents. Significant efforts at those times could pay off in the longer term. Remembering that parents often find secondary schools more intimidating and confusing due to the increased size, complexity and number of teachers, compared to primary schools, will help schools retain a perspective of parents' experiences.



Communication strategy

A communication strategy can help ensure that adequate supports are in place for families. When developing a communication strategy, schools should consider proactive and reactive school responses to parenting needs (for example, some universal approaches to providing information for all parents, and some responsive approaches for parents who raise worries). This can include use of existing school events to incorporate support for parents, particularly around transition points when parents' needs may be greater, and/or they may be more receptive to the information and support provided.

Planning considerations

When planning dissemination of parenting information, it is essential to firstly consider the school community's needs and effective ways to engage families in any kind of school activity.

Review current levels of engagement

Review the current level of engagement parents and carers have with the school and what has worked in the past when offering or providing support. This requires consideration of those parents and carers who have not been actively involved in the school. Activities such as surveys, discussions, focus groups, one on one chats and reviewing attendance at school could be useful in exploring engagement.



Consider school community demographics

Understanding the demographics or characteristics of the school community and their needs will support effective approaches to communicating with parents and inform the type of events likely to engage them. Identify groups that may not access or receive information and develop a plan for how to ask them how this could be addressed.



Consider school community cultural and linguistic needs

Developing the most appropriate approach for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds requires sensitivity. Language difficulties (including literacy issues) need to be considered when inviting opinion, sending information home or expecting parents to access information on the website.



Cultural and linguistic barriers

Stigma around parenting, mental health and seeking help can be a particular concern for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The Opening the School Gate resource has many suggestions about ways schools can reduce stigma and engage families, many of which will be relevant to all families. These include:

- Understand that not all family structures are based on the traditional western notion of the 'nuclear family'.
- Use interpreters where needed, so parents can communicate effectively
- Work with community members from cultural groups to understand factors relevant to that group.
- Recognise that parents are unlikely to feel welcome if the school is not appropriately reflecting cultural diversity.
- Plan for language or culture-specific parent meetings.
- Ask advice from students and bicultural workers about what parents may find culturally appropriate before launching into a strategy.



Include students in the development of the communication strategy

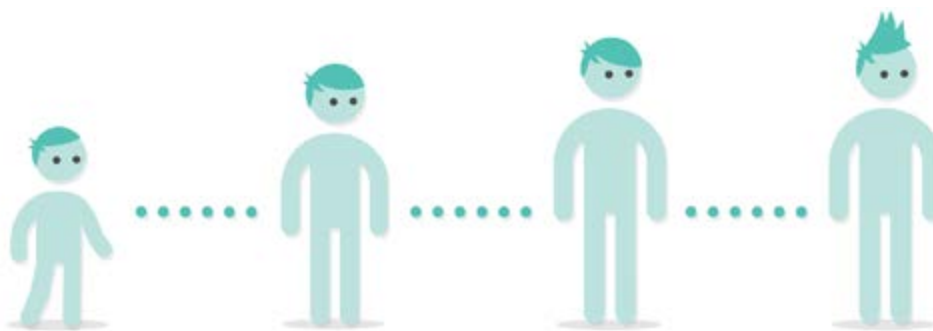
Look at ways to include students in the communication strategies that are developed. Students can be powerful influences on their parents. If they are keen for their parents to be involved, it is much more likely that parents will attend events and actively participate in the life of the school. Seek ways to include students in parent sessions, e.g. as presenters or thought leaders.

Explore needs with focus group

Consult with the parents committee and school council to explore needs of parents in the community and engage them in the planning from the start.

Consider the different stages of adolescence

The role of parents, their needs and ways of engaging them will vary depending upon the age and level of maturity of the student. This may also depend upon cultural issues as to when a young person is considered independent.



Information gathering considerations

MindMatters provides information about national programs and services for parents and young people that schools can promote to the whole school community. Below reflects considerations for the school community regarding the promotion of local services and programs.

Review existing support links to the school

Schools may have existing links with local agencies, services or private practitioners, which could be identified through discussions with student welfare staff and a review of referral processes.

Gather relevant information

Information of use to the parents and carers in the school community can be gathered from the local community or online.

Organise information

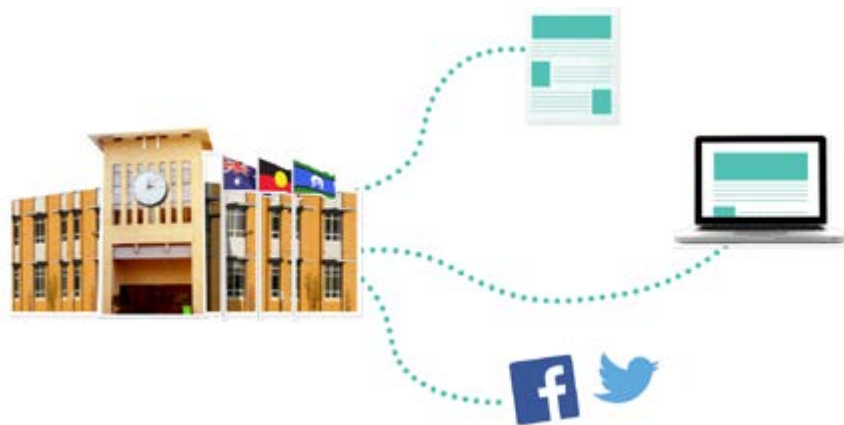
In your plan, organise information for specific audiences and needs (for example, information to be shared universally to all parents, or made available to parents who require support).



Engagement and information dissemination opportunities

Consistent messages about the school being a place where parents can obtain information and support for student mental health is important in setting the foundations for parents to feel comfortable in seeking information and attending events.

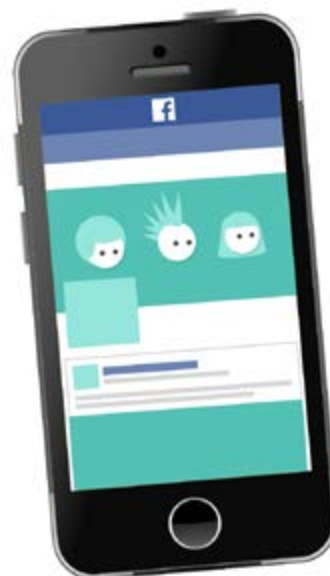
Schools will already have a range of existing communication vehicles with families and the broader community, which may include:



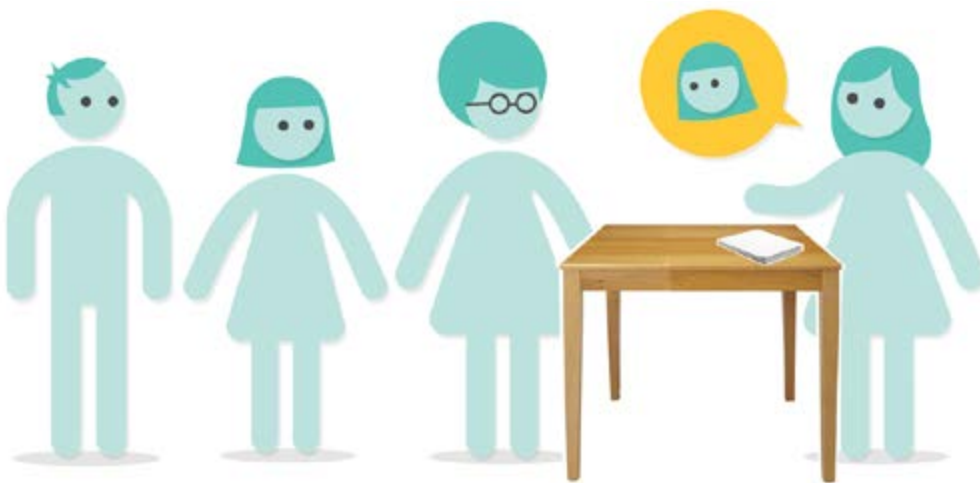
- **newsletters** – increasingly accessible online, that ideally contain a parenting section and upcoming events in the community
- **website** – ideally with a parent section with information, links and events, regular surveys or feedback mechanisms to check on its usefulness
- **social media** – as a way of promoting the school and engaging with the broader community, including parents.

Critically looking at the effectiveness of individual strategies and obtaining input from parents about what is the best way of reaching them is critical to success.

Increasingly our world is becoming technologically driven and parents will be using social media to keep in touch with each other and to gain information to support their parenting. Schools can tap into this interest by building a social media profile. Schools can get the most out of social media by careful planning when building and managing their social media profile. This includes adopting appropriate moderation strategies and policies that promote appropriate use. Careful planning and management will ensure the benefits outweigh any risks that staff may be concerned about.



- **information sessions** – for the transition into secondary school and between year levels, to assist with subject selections, to help make choices beyond school to further study or workplaces or about particular events such as school trips
- **phone calls** – ideally proactive for relationship building as well as when things go wrong
- **reporting mechanisms** – at various points in the year when parents are directly communicated with about their student's learning
- **face-to-face parent/teacher interviews** - often including the student, these can be optional unless worries are identified or can be built into accessing the school report.



Parent/teacher interviews are a key time for parents and teachers to meet to share information, celebrate success and raise worries with each other. These can be seen as key times where family engagement with the school can be demonstrated. Having shared expectations about the interviews, and an ability to work together to improve young people's educational outcomes, is more likely to be achieved when:

- **the interview is set up as a two-way conversation. This means that parents' perspectives are sought on students' strengths and needs, learning styles and non-school learning opportunities.**
- **family involvement is linked to learning.**
- **a balanced tone is used, which includes both what the student is doing well and what could be improved. This will send the message that the school values student strengths and has high expectations for all (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010).**

For more information see Module 3.3 Sharing concerns with parents.

Exploring new methods of communication

In addition to communication methods already used by the school, other new opportunities on how support could be provided at the school and to provide parents with information should be explored.



Some exploration ideas could include:

- engaging students in running forums or workshops
- holding workshops and parenting programs that parents have requested, facilitated by guest speakers and/or staff members with expertise about parenting, on a regular basis and open to the parent community as well as broader community members
- offering the school venue to local community agencies, services and private practitioners for holding workshops and parenting programs
- finding ways to set up social networks for groups of parents as an informal and safe mechanism for parents to support each other
- developing a 'cheat sheet' to help parents navigate their particular school, for example:
 - who to talk to at the school
 - how to make an appointment
 - the various roles at the school
 - sources of information for parents
 - events and activities.

Existing events at the school (for example, parent/teacher evenings, transition evenings, year level information sessions, camp information sessions) should be explored to see how these could be used as potential new ways to communicate with parents.



Review communication processes and policies

Existing school communication procedures and policies should be considered for their success in meeting the information and support needs of parents. Suggested review activities include:

- review of policies and processes for referral, for those times when parents need more urgent support. This should include an examination of internal school referral pathways and external referral mechanisms. This will ensure that all staff are aware of who to talk to within the school if the needs of the family go beyond the information provision level that the school can provide.
- determining staff roles, and role boundaries, within the school to ensure role clarity. For example, different staff members may be best placed to develop and implement a communication plan, identify relevant information or promote communication activities, while others may play a role in supporting families who raise worries.
- communication with all staff about their roles, and the staff responsible for different aspects of providing support, will ensure staff are not overwhelmed and are confident and engaged in supporting parents.



Getting parent input into any reviews and for identifying or refining processes and policies will be critical to success.

Disseminating information – School examples

Examples from schools of successful approaches or programs:

- **parent information sessions facilitated by students** – Drawing on information developed by students in class, these sessions are developed and facilitated by students with the support of school staff and student wellbeing staff. As students are engaged in the sessions, they encourage parents to attend and in doing so build communication between students, staff and families.
- **parenting groups with interpreters** – Parenting groups, planned and facilitated with community members from specific cultural groups, use interpreters for parents who do not speak English. This approach has worked well in respecting cultural understandings, and building trust and communication with culturally and linguistically diverse groups.
- **somalian mothers' group** – A group of Somalian mothers participated in a parenting support group facilitated by a community worker and a parent liaison officer at the school. The purpose of the group was to support the parents in finding out about the education system in Australia, encourage their participation at the school and hear their worries.

The Somalian mothers were more familiar with a school system that highly valued the teacher's authority and did not encourage parents to be involved in the education of their young person. Hearing how the Australian education system did value their input was of great interest to them and helped them to understand why the school was encouraging their participation.

The mothers were also concerned about where their young people were at the end of the school day and were often anxious about their safety. It was identified that many of the young people were interested in playing sport, but the families did not have the knowledge, transport or funding to engage them in after school sporting programs. The school and agency worker together wrote a successful proposal for a VicHealth grant that enabled a school-community after school sporting program to be established. The funds were used to provide equipment, and create partnerships with local sporting clubs, to enable the students to participate in sport. The project was highly successful and continued for a number of years.





- **connecting with parents over school attendance** – A school employed an education support worker on a part-time basis to monitor student attendance. This had been prioritised as an area of concern by the school and an approach to tackle this, from an early intervention angle, was developed. The worker was supported by a student welfare coordinator and together they identified students of concern requiring follow up. This included phone conversations with parents of students who were missing school without communication from parents.

Through the process of making contact with parents, the worker was able to hear about worries facing the student and family. Working with the student welfare coordinator, they were able to provide information, make referrals and generally provide support to the family. Over time, this led to a reduction in attendance issues and greater parental engagement with the school.

MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au

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