

# Guidance on the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion

A response from the Family and Parenting Institute

29 June 2007

## 1. Introduction

The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) is the UK's leading centre of expertise in families and the upbringing of children. We advocate for improved family and parenting services and we press for policy change to help address the challenges that families are facing. We welcome the new duty for schools to promote community cohesion and the opportunity to comment on the draft guidance.

## 2. Parents' involvement in schools

Parents are a key part of the school community and its interaction with the wider world. Their engagement is recognised in the guidance as an important way to promote community cohesion. Parents' involvement in their children's learning has also been shown to have a significant impact on educational achievement. The challenge is that not all parents feel comfortable in a school environment. Some may have had negative experiences during their own schooldays, or feel that their own limited education places them at a disadvantage with professionals.

There are some barriers which particularly affect parents from minority ethnic communities such as limited fluency and literacy in English. Older children may even be actively seeking to keep parents and school separate, to avoid embarrassment for themselves or their parents. (Crozier et al., 2004). If the social, cultural and practical barriers are not addressed, attempts to increase parental involvement may risk further disadvantaging the already disadvantaged (Reynolds, 2006).

At the simplest level, methods of communication such as letters home may not be suitable. Schools therefore need to avoid a 'one size fits all approach'. For some parents emails are convenient and simple, while for others personal phone calls are the only effective way of reaching them. A home-school liaison officer can be invaluable in reaching parents and building up a relationship. Practical issues such as childcare demands and unsocial working hours also mean that flexibility is essential in arranging meetings with teachers. The document 'Parental involvement in multi-ethnic schools', on the DfES's own Standards Site, contains useful examples of good practice in these areas.

For a good relationship to exist between the school and parents from all communities, 'parental involvement' must include responding to parents' own agendas rather than simply seeking parents' cooperation in implementing the school's agenda. Again, a home-school liaison officer can facilitate this, although it also requires a deeper cultural shift within the school.

The guidance should also be clear about different strategies for primary and secondary schools as the extent of parents' involvement with their child's secondary school is likely to be very different from the relationship with their primary school.

For a good working relationship between parents and schools it is important to get it right from the start. The DfES Starting School Project ([www.familyandparenting.org/startingSchoolProject](http://www.familyandparenting.org/startingSchoolProject)), currently being delivered by the Family and Parenting Institute and 4Children, provides sessions for parents at the start of primary and secondary school. Benefits for parents include getting to know the parents of their children's classmates and gaining confidence about what to expect. The school is able to project a positive image as a caring institution. Some schools used the opportunity to focus on parents who do not come into school often, by offering a crèche, transport or translation. This gave schools the chance to understand these parents' concerns as well as providing information to them.

### **3. A broader view of diversity**

As the aim of this guidance is to encourage schools to create a welcoming environment for all pupils, parents and staff, and foster an understanding of difference, it would be helpful for it to refer to dimensions of diversity other than ethnicity and faith. For example, anti-bullying policies which deal explicitly with homophobic as well as racist bullying should be in place. Schools should be proactive in meeting the needs of disabled parents as well as disabled students (Morris, 2004).

### **4. Admissions**

While not the focus of this consultation, we would like to comment on the importance of school admissions procedures. It is easier for children to make friendships with those from other ethnic groups or social backgrounds if their school is diverse. This is important in relation to community cohesion, not least because research has found that parents' social capital is directly affected by their children's friendships.

Religion and ethnicity are relatively insignificant during early childhood as a prompt for or barrier to friendship. The early cross-cultural friendships of children in primary school not only shape the patterns of their friendships as they grow older, but children's friendships across ethnic boundaries also help challenge parental prejudices (Bruegel, 2006). However, these parental prejudices in the context of school choice can increase segregation by class and ethnicity, reducing the chance for children to form cross-cultural friendships. In summary, diversity between schools can reduce diversity within schools.

The vision for extended schools is that they should be an integral part of the local community. However, there is some contradiction between this and the policy of increased choice so more children can attend a 'good' school out of their immediate locality, thus reducing children's local friendship networks, and by extension, those of their parents. It should also be recognised that not all children will be able to go to a 'chosen' school, and that going to a school which they know has a bad reputation can

affect children's self-image, and their ability to make friends in the new school (Bruegel, 2006).

Although it is important for schools to promote community cohesion, the context they are working in is shaped by the outcome of admissions procedures. It is therefore vital that research continues on how this process can support community cohesion and the social capital of children and families. This research should then be used to inform evidence-based policy-making.

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