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Working with parents to support the learning of pupils who use EAL: Guidance for schools



About The Bell Foundation

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. Through generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy and systems for children, adults and communities in the UK disadvantaged through language.

The Foundation works in two key areas:

- **The EAL Programme aims to improve the educational outcomes of children with English as an Additional Language in the UK to benefit the individual child and society as a whole. The Foundation works in partnership with a range of organisations across the education system to provide training and resources in order to build capacity, develop and evaluate models of good practice, and provide thought leadership.**
- **The Criminal Justice Programme seeks to break down the language barrier to accessing justice and rehabilitation for individuals in contact with the criminal justice system for whom English is an Additional Language. In 2017 the Foundation developed a long-term strategy for its work in the sector, with a focus on both victims and offenders of crime. The Foundation works through interventions in research, policy, practice and service support.**

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What does this guidance cover?

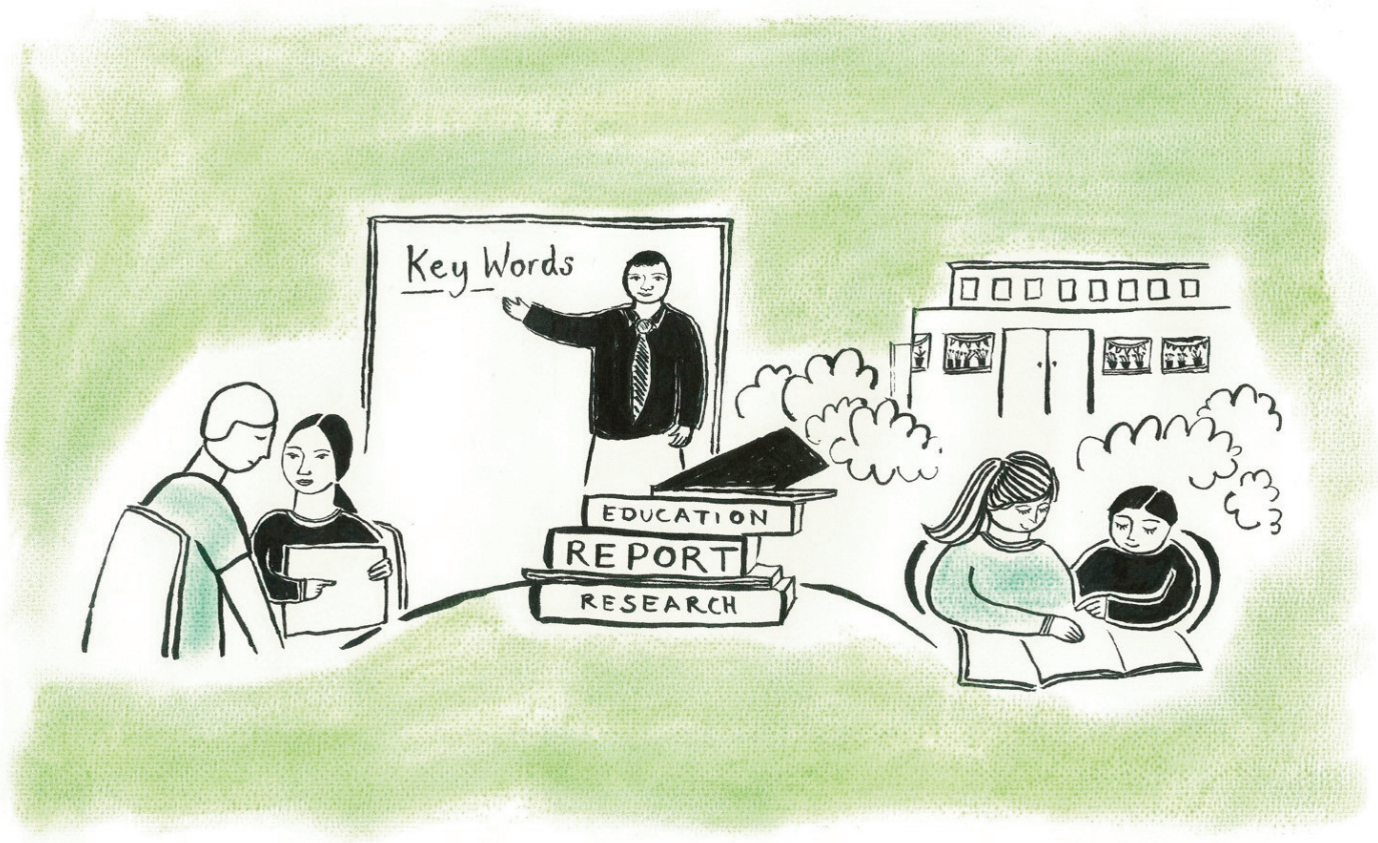
This guidance provides four recommendations for practitioners on working with the parents of pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) so they can support their child's learning at home. It draws on research around parental involvement in children's learning with a particular focus on the learning of children who use EAL. The recommendations are likely to support children's learning at any time but may be particularly important while schools are closed.

This guidance is modelled on, and draws from the four recommendations in the Education Endowment Foundation's Guidance report **Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning**.

- 1) Critically review how you work with parents
- 2) Provide practical strategies to support learning at home
- 3) Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning
- 4) Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed

Who is this guidance for?

The guidance is designed to support practitioners in primary and secondary schools, including teachers, teaching assistants and EAL professionals, to work with the parents of EAL pupils with the aim of improving learning outcomes. The guidance may also have relevance for other stakeholders, such as school leaders, parents, trainee teachers, and initial teacher educators.



1. Critically review how you work with parents

It is widely accepted that parental involvement is effective in supporting children's learning overall. However, although the association between parental involvement and a child's academic success is well-established, evidence in the **EEF's Toolkit** suggests that there is little robust evidence on which approaches are most effective in improving parental engagement, particularly for disadvantaged families.

For parents of children with EAL, there can be additional challenges to parental participation. Evans et al (2016) found that staff can make incorrect assumptions about parental interest and, at times, interpret lack of achievement by pupils as lack of parental interest. Rodriguez-Brown (2009) found that certain linguistic minority parents (those speaking a language different from the one spoken by the national majority), whilst holding great respect for teachers and education, felt anxious because of their own lower levels or lack of formal education. Evans et al (2016) also noted that parents of pupils with EAL, especially those who have low levels of English and/or are new to the English school system, face a range of specific barriers including a lack of understanding of the English school system and, therefore, difficulties in supporting children in things such as homework and assessment tasks.

This highlights a need for schools and practitioners to critically review existing practice around working with parents of EAL pupils to identify where things are working well and where adjustments might need to be made. Considering evidence drawn out through this review process can help guide future plans and identify where support or staff training may be needed.

When reviewing practice around working with parents, it can be helpful to:

- Think about who the parents of your EAL pupils are, and what their barriers may be to involvement. You may want to consider things such as:
 - Parents' own experiences of education
 - Expectations around their child's education
 - Language(s) spoken
 - Levels of literacy in their home language
 - Levels of English language proficiency
 - Working patterns, and/or childcare responsibilities among parents, and their availability to attend school meetings
- Speak to parents to find out what facilitates and what impedes their involvement in school activities. While home learning is taking place, this could be done via video messaging where visual cues can support understanding. If there is a member of staff who shares the same language as the parents, ask them to help speak to parents.
- Ensure all staff understand the possible barriers to involvement for parents of EAL learners, particularly those who are new to English.
- Adopt a whole school approach to enhancing parental involvement by ensuring all school staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities.
- Provide training for staff who are not confident in working with the parents of EAL pupils. For additional guidance on CPD for teaching staff see resources from The Bell Foundation including; a best practice article in SecEd magazine on **CPD for the EAL classroom**, freely available **Webinars** for practitioners, **Secondary Classroom Support Strategies** and **Online training courses** for practitioners.

2. Provide practical strategies to support home learning

Practitioners can help parents by providing practical guidance on what steps they can take to support their child's learning at home. In doing this, it is important to be mindful of potential barriers to understanding, and ensure that all guidance is clear, comprehensible and accessible for all EAL parents, especially those who are New to English. This is particularly important at a time when schools are closed, but it is equally valuable at any time, to support what children are learning in school. Practitioners should consider that the parents of EAL pupils, especially those who have low levels of English and/or are new to the English school system, may not understand how the English education system works (Evans et al 2016), what the curriculum comprises or how specifics are taught. This may be because education systems are very different in families' home countries. The parents of learners using EAL may also lack the English language skills to support with homework, activities, tasks, and curriculum content.

To maximise involvement from parents of EAL pupils, schools could:

- Provide parents with information about the school e.g. information about groupings and expectations around homework – with many visuals and ideally translated into major languages – this will serve to make sure that the parents feel included from the outset.
- Provide parents with key information about curriculum topics and up-to-date teaching approaches with translations if possible, if not then written in clear simple English with visual support. See The Bell Foundation's guidance on **EAL Nexus** about making home learning accessible for the parents of EAL learners.
- Highlight the value of multilingualism. Research shows that the maintenance of the first language has been found to accelerate the process of learning a second language (Cummins, 2017; Baker, 2001; Dressler and Kamil, 2006). Many parents of learners with EAL might not be aware of this so it is important that schools remind and inform parents of the importance of bilingualism, multilingualism, and home language maintenance.
- Communicate to parents that pupils can still learn the curriculum content in their first language, and that the school encourages this. EAL parents and carers are likely to have fluency in their first language or languages, with which to support their child's learning. For example, parents can read at home in the first language and use their first language to help their children with homework. See The Bell Foundation's guidance on EAL Nexus about **using an EAL learners' first language**.
- Promote shared reading in the home language as a way of supporting oral language development and literacy. As children get older, parents could listen to them read and encourage them to work out words if they get stuck or give them a clue. Schools may want to consider providing parents with multilingual resources to use during home learning. **Little Linguist** and **Mantra Lingua** have a good selection of books. Particular books which are well regarded are 'Azzi in between' by Sarah Garland and 'Into the forest' by Anthony Brown. Schools could also encourage parents to use the stories available on **World Stories** and **Unite for Literacy**.

3. Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning

Well designed, and accessible communications are an important way of involving the parents of EAL pupils in understanding and supporting their children's learning and progress. It is important to consider that while parents and carers of EAL pupils will undoubtedly want to support their child's learning they may lack the English language skills, confidence or understanding of the education system in England to do this. This means that all school communications and messages must be delivered as clearly and comprehensibly as possible. This is particularly important while schools are closed, as there may be additional and very important information going home at this time on health issues (e.g. social distancing), expectations about which children are invited to attend school and procedures for home learning. These messages may ordinarily be discussed in the playground in first languages, but this support is not currently available.

To ensure school communications encourage a positive dialogue about learning, schools could:

- Review whether current communications e.g. newsletters or websites, are effective in reaching the parents of EAL learners. Consider whether current methods give parents the information they want and need in the most accessible way. It can be helpful to ask parents what would work best for them, but alternatives to more traditional approaches might include:
 - Using audio or video messages as well as written information to ensure those families who are New to English, or not literate do not miss out on key school messages. This may also help to build confidence in engaging with the school.
 - Sending weekly text messages to parents with important information such as upcoming tests, what the children have been learning at school and whether homework has been submitted. It is important that these messages are written in clear, simple English.
 - Asking a member of staff who shares the same language as the parents to help translate key messages both verbally and in written form. Alternatively, seek to use a translation and interpreting service to help.
- Ensure parents of EAL learners have a voice by helping to establish parent networks in which they can use their first language. These networks can help parents of pupils using EAL to understand the school system and provide opportunities to contribute in their own language, values, skills, and recommendations (Evans et al 2016).
- Consider involving other family members who perhaps feel more confident in communicating with the school. There is some evidence that it is beneficial to involve other family members—not just the primary contact (Kraft, et al 2017). It is important, however, to avoid using pupils as translators for their parents as this can place undue pressure on the child, and there may be certain topics that need to be dealt with by an adult.

4. Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed

Some parents of EAL pupils may require more sustained and intensive support to become more actively involved with the school and their child's learning. Evidence suggests that parents' isolation from services may be involuntary (for example, because of language differences, poor health, long or unsociable work hours, lack of money) or voluntary (for example, because involvement would be threatening or stigmatising) (Boag-Munroe et al, 2012, Axford et al, 2012). It is also important to consider that parents' own poor experience of school can contribute to a reticence to engage fully in children's learning. This means school staff should focus any additional support in a sensitive way to avoid stigmatising or discouraging parents.

Schools may wish to consider the following ideas as ways to offer more sustained and intensive support to the parents of EAL pupils:

- Speak to parents personally to offer additional support, such as breakfast or after school clubs. Face-to-face, or video meetings can help ensure information is communicated more clearly with plenty of visual cues to aid understanding.
- Consider home visits or one-to-one support conducted via video messaging, especially for newly arrived parents or parents of younger children. This may be particularly beneficial for the parents who are least likely to attend meetings at preschool or school, or those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Astuto and Allen, 2014).
- Make special arrangements for parents' evenings, such as arranging for interpreters or **Young Interpreters Scheme** pupils to be present for their time at school.
- Organise and invite parents who speak languages other than English as their first language to an EAL parents' evening. Smaller group evenings can be less daunting to parents of EAL pupils and they might feel more at ease in smaller group settings. These can be excellent opportunities to ask the parents about any school issues that they would like resolved, that you might otherwise be unaware of. Also, you might be better able to provide slower, more relaxed sessions explaining topics such as the English Educational System, the importance of ongoing home language use or philosophy of education in Britain.
- Establish which parents might benefit from English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and, where possible, provide classes for them to attend. If this is not possible, provide them with information about local classes they can attend. While schools are closed, parents may find it useful to do some online self-study to help improve their English. Schools might wish to signpost parents to the **British Council** Learn English website. Manzoni and Rolfe (2019) identified that some schools found ESOL classes helpful in conveying information about the school's policies and practices to parents who were less likely to engage with the school in other ways.
- Employ staff who can relate to the parents of EAL learners, and who can build relationships that will actively promote parental involvement. Parent Ambassadors can be a good way of empowering families who require support to voice their opinions and ask questions about their child's learning.

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