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# Parental involvement in formal education

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# **Parental involvement in formal education**

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## Introduction

### Scope of the report

This report provides an overview of the latest academic and policy literature on parental involvement (PI) in formal education in Europe. The vision of shared responsibility for the educational success of the young generation has become commonly adopted among stakeholders, and parents are frequently referred to as educational partners (European Commission, 2015). With scholarly literature consistently finding positive effects for parental involvement, on both children's learning and their well-being, interest in PI remains justifiably high.

More specifically, the report:

- summarises empirical evidence on the relationship between PI and learning outcomes;
- reviews existing and emerging barriers to PI;
- reviews the patterns of PI among different types of families and at different stages of education;
- identifies, wherever possible, relevant case studies and emerging practices that enable PI;
- reviews the experiences of parents during the closure of schools in 2020 due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Because the pandemic is ongoing, this section covers the most recent publications, and the discussion is not conclusive with regard to the medium- and long-term implications for PI.
- offers tentative policy recommendations contributing to the advancement of the inclusive education policy agenda in Europe.

### Definition of parental involvement

*Parental involvement* (PI) is a broad term that encompasses various types of parental behaviours and practices that support school learning and the academic progress of their children. PI can be further categorised into *school-based* and *home-based* activities. School-based activities include attending teacher-parent meetings at which a student's progress is discussed; participating in local structures, such as committees that contribute to school governance; as well as volunteering and fundraising for extra-curricular activities and events. Home-based activities include communication between parents and children about their school progress, cultivating academic aspirations (both of these activities are defined as *academic socialisation*); providing an environment conducive to learning at home, helping with homework and following the child's overall learning progress (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Some of the sources reviewed apply the term *parental engagement* to indicate a more active involvement of parents in the learning process that also represents a greater commitment on their side (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). But while differences do indeed exist in the behaviours and strategies adopted by parents, our desk research reveals that *parental involvement* remains the most commonly used, generic term that also encompasses *parental engagement*. Similarly, *parent-school cooperation* is used throughout the report as an umbrella term that refers to interactions between parents and schools, school authorities and personnel, which may be otherwise described in some studies as *link*, *contact*, *collaboration*, or *partnership*. *Parent-teacher cooperation* is also used in a broader sense, to refer to exchange, communication, meetings, collaboration and related activities.

## The link between parental involvement and children's learning

Numerous scholarly papers – including those based on the analysis of the individual-level (student) data, as well as meta-level studies – continue to confirm the importance of PI for outcomes relating to the learning and well-being of children. Among the most important of these outcomes is the positive effect of PI on learners' academic results (Hill and Tyson, 2009; Castro et al., 2015). In addition to this, positive effects are also widely documented in relation to reducing school absenteeism, preventing school burnout, improved behaviour at school and positive relationships with schoolmates, and social skills (Virtanen et al., 2018; Wang and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

More detailed analyses, however, lead to the conclusion that not all types of parental involvement lead to positive outcomes in learning. *Academic socialisation* - discussing school matters with a child - proved to be the strongest predictor of academic success across multiple studies (Hill and Tyson, 2009). It reflects values and attitudes to education, and frequently shaped by socio-economic background of parents. Conversely, *supervising and assisting with homework* is negatively associated with learning outcomes, especially during later stages of schooling. The explanation for this lies in the reasons behind such parental involvement. One way for low-achieving students to improve their academic performance at school is by completing homework or other additional exercises and tasks – a process that is monitored by their parents. Frequently, both parents and students are under pressure, making conflict between them highly likely. In tense or conflictual situations such as these, parental involvement does not lead to the positive impact expected. One of the strategies employed to increase both the quality of parent-child relationships and to improve academic outcomes was the use of private tutoring (Otto and Karbach, 2019).

What remain outside of the scope of this report are the indirect effects of parental involvement on a child's learning success. Such effects occur as a result of the relationship between parental involvement and the child's well-being. Policies and targeted measures that support and guide parents with regard to their child's nutrition, physical fitness, mental health and resiliency, engagement in risky behaviour, and safe use of technology, will have a positive effect on the general well-being of a student. The overall well-being of a child, as well as their mental and physical safety, are the foundations for the child's healthy development, and are directly linked (among other factors) to their motivation at school; concentration; their capacity to learn, retain and apply the knowledge; as well as other behavioural and cognitive aspects. Therefore, offering greater support to parents in these domains could lead to parental involvement having an even larger positive effect on child's outcomes.

## 1. Barriers to parental involvement

Multiple barriers to PI have been identified by academic and policy practitioners. In this report, these are grouped into three levels: parental and family resources and individual experiences (the 'micro' level); policies and practices in schools and education systems (the 'meso' level); and socio-cultural norms and welfare systems (the 'macro' level). This report acknowledges the complexity and interconnected nature of the barriers to PI across all three levels. As such, these groupings are used solely for the purposes of brevity and clarity.

### Parental and family circumstances

The barriers in this group that are referred to most frequently are:

- Parents' **own past negative memories and experiences** of education. These present one of the most powerful barriers to PI (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Frequently, parents have gone through negative experiences with peers and teachers themselves as children. They have struggled with learning, lacked support both from teachers and from their own parents, or they have dropped out of school. As parents, they now tend to distrust schools and teachers, and believe that their own opinions will not matter. They may also be uncomfortable in school settings, which trigger a range of negative emotions.
- Parents **lack of knowledge** as to **how the education system works, or in relation to new reforms and policies**. While this barrier often refers to immigrant families (especially first-generation), or parents with a low level of education, understanding the demands and requirements of school system may be a challenge for many families. In recent years, education reforms have occurred in many countries and across various levels of education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). These concern enrolment, examination schedules, and the provision of differentiated programmes in secondary education, to name a few. Information about such changes may be communicated in a manner that is not supportive of parents, potentially leaving them feeling disoriented.
- **Lack of language skills** is frequently cited as a barrier for immigrant parents. According to the literature on immigration, language barriers remain pervasive across many aspects of life, not just in education. One of the tools to motivate and support PI among immigrant families has been the introduction of translators/cultural mediators in several EU Member States. In 2019, a study found that such intermediaries had been introduced in 13 of the 42 education systems analysed (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Such resources were introduced into the education system in Luxembourg back in 2009. Parents can access of support from mediators not only in the specific context of PI, but in relation to all education-related questions: the overall structure of education system, school enrolment, the health and well-being of their child at school, translation of documents, etc. At present, such support is offered in 37 languages. Other languages not included in this list may also be requested.<sup>1</sup>
- **Parental stress and burnout** is gaining attention in research, policy and the media due to its potentially highly detrimental consequences on the well-being and safety of children. These range from emotional and physical neglect to aggression and violence in the most extreme cases. It is estimated that between 5% and 36% of parents experience parental burnout (Mrošková et al., 2020). The variation in its

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<sup>1</sup><https://men.public.lu/content/dam/men/catalogue-publications/scolarisation-des-eleves-etranangers/informations-generales/mediateurs-interculturels.pdf>



incidence depends on the prevalence of triggering factors.<sup>2</sup> Research evidence suggests that caring for young children, or for multiple children, are associated with high levels of stress and potential burnout among parents. Among the strongest predictors of parental burnout, however, is caring for children with chronic and/or multiple illnesses - 43% of mothers and 27% of fathers in this category have experienced parental burnout (Mrošková et al., 2020).

- The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the closure of schools and childcare facilities across Europe as well as a switch to distance learning, brought new challenges and significantly raised parental stress levels (Calvano et al., 2021). For further discussion of the challenges posed to PI in education for parents and children during the ongoing pandemic, see the sub-section on COVID-19.

## Education systems and potential systemic bias

In many European societies, the formalisation of parent-school cooperation and the expansion of parents' rights with regard to their children's education can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s. These changes followed on from societal trends towards broader democratisation in the 1960s. In Ireland, for instance, a proactive, 'bottom-up' movement by parents challenged the Church/State dominance of education management, as well as the same-sex schooling common among Catholic schools (Byrne, 2020). In the UK, the movement for gender equality, access to education and employment, known as second-wave feminism, pushed for the expansion of childcare and a rethinking of the traditional division of labour between mothers and fathers in the care and education of their children (David et al., 2020). Despite the prevalence of 'shared responsibility' in today's discourse, and the widespread acknowledgment of the importance of PI, notable differences remain both between and within education systems, leading to the following barriers in certain countries:

- The inclusion of **parents in decision-making processes** is subject to institutional settings defined not only at national level, but also at regional and local levels. Historically, collective rights such as the right to establish parents' associations, were granted as far back as the 1960s in Germany, Norway and Switzerland; during the 1970s in Iceland, Ireland, and Portugal; in the 1980s in the UK and the Netherlands, and in the 1990s in Slovakia and Sweden. Differences remain, both in terms of the extent to which parents engage in formal representative structures, as well as in the formal power that parents possess with regard to school governance (Byrne and Paseka, 2020). For instance, only 5% of the parents of sixth-graders served on a school Board of Management in Ireland in 2015 (Byrne, 2020). The OECD's PISA 2012 assessments pointed to similarly low levels of formal involvement among the parents of 15-year-old students – between 2% and 9% in Northern and Western Europe, and over 10% in parts of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe (OECD, 2013). It may be relevant to add here that the results of the OECD's PISA 2018 show an increase in formal participation of 2-5% across European participants (OECD, 2019b). With respect to parents' decision-making power, notable differences again appear between European education systems: in Iceland, parent representative organisations have no formal influence at national level (Byrne and Paseka, 2020), while in Portugal, elected parent representatives are appointed to a school-level General Council that oversees strategic

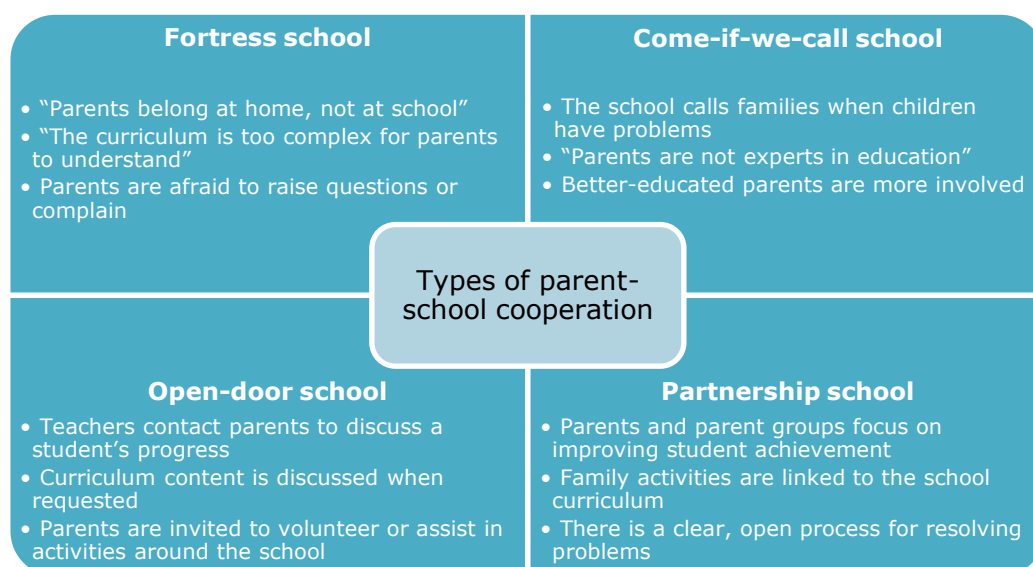
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<sup>2</sup> At an individual level, these are the socio-demographic background of parents (educational level, working conditions and associated stress, financial stability, joblessness, etc.); individual personality traits (e.g. introversion vs. extraversion, emotional stability vs. instability, etc.); their personal health situation (e.g. anxiety or depression); parental factors (e.g. self-efficacy, child-rearing practices); family functioning (e.g. satisfaction with partner, family disorganisation, support through other family members).

management and monitoring, and to an Administrative Council, which, among other things, elects the school principal (Gonçalves, 2020). Desk research carried out for this report reveals gaps in the existing analysis, particularly in terms of research focusing on recent developments in the formal involvement of parents in the light of ongoing changes in European education governance, from a comparative perspective.

- Inconsistencies in, or a lack of **formalisation** of, parent-teacher/school cooperation in legislation and in national education policy, as well as a lack of **clearly outlined modalities** of cooperation that are regularly communicated and shared with parents, can amplify the risk of parents being excluded from participation, especially among vulnerable families. Some studies show that schools are given significant freedom in defining the core content and organisation of their cooperation with parents. Given the significant **heterogeneity between schools** (in terms of teachers, pedagogical approaches, school resources, etc.) their understanding of what constitutes 'cooperation' varies considerably. The insightful categorisation of schools found in US literature may be relevant to the European context. This suggests that schools tend to fall into one of the following four types: *fortress* school, *come-if-we-call* school, *open-door* school, or *partnership* school (Henderson et al., 2007). Evidently, *fortress* and *come-if-we-call* schools offer the least space for PI, and have strictly defined conditions for the participation of parents, as well as potentially more inflexible views of parents. At the other end of the spectrum, *open-door* and *partnership* schools welcome parents as active and valuable partners in the education process. The different approaches pursued by schools can result in a situation where public and policy discourse encourages parents to assume a more active role and responsibility in cooperation with schools, while in practice the schools' relationships with parents might not be egalitarian, and some families might have limited control over the ways in which schools and teachers choose to interact with them.

Figure 1: Typology of parent-school cooperation



Source: Adapted from Henderson et al. (2007)

*Box 1. Parents' briefcase (La mallette des parents)*

**'Parents' briefcase' in France**

This programme was launched in 2008, initially across 40 lower-level secondary schools ('collèges') in disadvantaged areas by inviting 400 parents to participate in several rounds of discussions with educational stakeholders. By 2012, the programme had been extended to 1,300 secondary schools, with supporting tools and materials being made available to parents. By 2018, the programme had become available to parents with children in pre-school, primary and secondary school. There are spaces devoted to parents and to teachers. Parents are offered support in understanding and navigating each of stage of education. In addition, meetings are organised for the parents. Today, the programme covers a wide range of topics, from children's well-being to pedagogical tools for learning, language development, and so on.

An evaluation carried out by the Paris School of Economics found that the programme had a positive effect on parental knowledge of the education system, as well as on parental involvement, and on decreased rates of student absenteeism and behavioural problems.

Ref: <https://mallettedesparents.education.gouv.fr>

- **Vertical vs. horizontal communication** is closely linked to the discussion above, and is an element in the **power relations** between schools and parents. In some cases, as early as the ECEC stage, parents are subjected to hierarchical roles and styles of communication, as documented in Finnish and Icelandic studies (Alasuutari, 2010; Einarsdottir and Jónsdóttir, 2019). Certainly, cases exist in which the vertical communication is flipped, and parents – particularly those with higher socio-economic status – take a leading role and make their own demands, discarding the professional knowledge of education and care providers, as demonstrated in Swedish ECEC study (Hedlin, 2019). Parent-teacher relationships are a delicate matter, and building and maintaining a trustful and cooperative dynamic requires mutual efforts, as well as knowledge and experience.
- **Inflexible scheduling at schools** is another barrier that affects parental involvement, as meetings and activities frequently take place during the working hours of teachers and school personnel. Changing conditions in the labour market, which may involve parents' prolonged presence in the office, or working irregular hours and shifts, as well as high rates of employment among mothers (upon whom child-rearing tasks predominantly fall) inevitably lead to scheduling conflicts with schools and teachers. As a result, the timing of such events, and employers' refusal to grant parents time off to attend them, are among the most frequently cited reasons for parents' inability to participate in school-based activities (OECD, 2020). This is especially notable among parents unjustly labelled as "hard to reach" – parents employed in low-skilled jobs are frequently among those called to work shifts and who do not have flexible work arrangements with their employers, compared with parents in high-skilled jobs.
- Another reason why parents with younger or multiple children withdraw from involvement with the school is **inadequate availability of childcare and out-of-school care** (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Eurofound, 2020). While the substantial progress has been made across EU countries, the shortage of places (or discrepancies in schedules between workplaces and the opening hours of care centres) continue to complicate family lives.

- Building and sustaining cooperation with parents appears to be particularly challenging for recently graduated teachers, or those with only a few years of work experience. In the Netherlands, for instance, one-third of teachers expressed a **lack of confidence** in their skills and a **lack of practical tools** to build strong relationships with parents, particularly those with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Leenders et al., 2019). In Iceland, some ECEC teachers expressed similar difficulties in involving parents with minority ethnic and language backgrounds in dialogues about education (Einarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir, 2019). In addition, while educators and parents both approve of an egalitarian model of cooperation, **translating this into practice** remains a challenge (*ibid.*).

## Structural and socio-cultural determinants

Differences between European countries have an influence on the ways in which parents and families engage in the care and education of their children. Such factors include the economy and social policies, as well as culture and society. In this sub-section, we briefly touch on some of these barriers:

- **Time constraints on parents, due to a growing rate of employment.** Such constraints negatively impact both the home-based and school-based activities of parents, and increasingly of mothers. Participation in labour market among mothers with children between up to 14 years old continues to rise across European societies, according to data from the OECD. Employment rates among this group range from just under 60% in Greece and Italy, to more than 80% in Iceland, Denmark and Sweden. Part-time employment among mothers is common in countries such as Austria (42% of all employed mothers), the Netherlands (50%), and Switzerland (62%), but remains uncommon in countries such as Bulgaria (1%), Hungary (3.4%) and Croatia (4%)<sup>3</sup>. We conclude, therefore, that the majority of mothers in Europe work full-time. In fact, the rate of employment among mothers with children aged 0-14 years is higher (73%) than among women without children (63%). When comparing families with one child with those who have two children in the age range above, rates of employment among mothers remain similar within a given country, but drop off significantly in many countries among mothers in families with three or more children. Employment rates among mothers with high education are considerably higher: in the majority of European countries, they range between 80% and 90%. Greater variation in employment rates exists among mothers with a low level of education, ranging from 74% in Portugal to 26.6% in Slovak Republic (*ibid.*). In general, many families are likely to experience time deficits in relation to various child-rearing activities, including involvement in education.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

*Box 2. Working parents' practical strategies to stay involved*

Desk research into effective, evidence-based measures and strategies to help full-time employed parents to remain more actively involved in school-based activities did not yield any relevant academic and policy literature, suggesting that this remains a largely **under-investigated area**. Our search also revealed that **parents had to devise their own strategies**, which they share on personal blogs or school forums. While these methods are not scientifically evaluated, they nevertheless provide an important insight into parents' behaviour driven by their desire to be involved in the education and well-being of their children. Below is a non-exhaustive list of advice provided by such sources:

1. Parents are advised to **focus on enriching the home learning environment**, and less on school-based activities, as home activities are related with better academic results.
2. If parents are, nevertheless, expected to participate in school activities, they are advised to be selective as to which activities they get involved in. Advice suggests that they **choose one or two activities** that will not require frequent or in-person attendance.
3. Parents are encouraged to identify and use **the most effective communication tools**. In an increasingly digitalised world, the physical presence of parents at school can be limited to specific events, while important information can be shared through dedicated school websites, for example, with parents being given access to information about their children's academic results, and teachers sharing accompanying notes.
4. Parents are advised to **plan in advance** when important teacher-parent meetings are coming up. Usually, the schedule is communicated at least a few days in advance, and regular meetings can be anticipated beforehand (e.g. end of term, or the beginning of a school year). This leaves parents some time to arrange matters such as childcare with a family member or another trusted adult or carer, as well as organising transport for children, informing and requesting leave from work in advance, negotiating which parent will attend the meeting (for separated and divorced parents), etc.
5. In addition, parents are urged to **prepare themselves** for teacher-parent meetings. Parents should focus on two to three major topics they would like to discuss with the teacher, as this is one of the (rare) opportunities to do so in person. During the meeting, parents should ask directly for advice on ways how to support their children in specific areas of learning. Such an approach brings at least two benefits: i) parents receive professional and practical advice that they can put to immediate use to help their child; and ii) teachers receive an important signal that the parents are committed and interested in their children learning progress, even if the parents rarely come to school.

- Increasingly, parents are experiencing **declining family support in childcare, and growing reliance on childcare services**. Family support, mainly offered by grandparents, is in decline across the Europe, although it remains more common in Southern and South-eastern regions, in line with a pronounced *familialistic* cultural tradition. Movement of families with young children towards urban areas of the same country, or migration to other EU Member States in pursuit of better employment opportunities, has reduced the availability of support from extended families, mostly grandparents. Instead, parents are forced to rely on childcare services offered by the state and by private providers. As a result, parents become the primary and sole carers of their children, bringing their situation closer to that of parents in countries with *individualistic* cultural traditions, with historically higher rates of female employment and more equal division of care tasks between fathers and mothers, as seen in Northern European societies. On the other hand, **schools**

**appeal to parents** or legal guardians (and **not to families in a broader sense**) to become active partners in educational processes. While references to *families* can still be found in policy and analytical reports in Southern Europe, e.g. Portugal (Gonçalves, 2020) and Cyprus (Symeou, 2020), there appears to be a uniform trend across European societies, in which nuclear families and parents are encouraged to play the central role.

## 2. Parental involvement in different types of families

### Nuclear families: mothers and fathers on an equal footing?

Parents in nuclear families make up the core of research into parental involvement in education. In earlier decades, children's education and care was the primary responsibility of mothers, and parental involvement was mainly targeted at and undertaken by them. Over recent years, many changes have occurred within couples and families. More women are pursuing educational and professional opportunities, and are having fewer children, and at a later age. The provision of quality ECEC and the reform of policies relating to parental leave – and its increasing take-up among fathers – have shifted the focus of PI towards **both parents as equally important actors**. Research evidence finds a lasting, positive effect of fathers' take-up of paternity and parental leave at the time of the childbirth in terms of the more equal sharing of childcare with mothers, as well as on fathers' more active participation in child-rearing activities, extending until the child reaches the age of three, and potentially beyond (Huerta et al., 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Literature on parental involvement demonstrates that as a child grows, both mothers and fathers engage in distinct but complementary parenting roles in relation to the education process (Kim and Hill 2015). While mothers show a greater level of involvement than fathers, the involvement of each parent has an equal effect on a child's outcomes. As a child grows, the involvement of parents changes: while engagement by fathers tends to remain relatively stable, while among mothers it evolves (*ibid.*). Mothers tend to lead the decision-making process in educational matters: 42.5% of mothers report that made decisions on their own, 49% jointly with the father of their children, while only 4% of fathers reported taking the lead (Cabus and Ariës 2017).

Research acknowledges the importance of parents' educational and socio-economic backgrounds: highly educated mothers *and* fathers engage more frequently in intellectually enriching activities, are better informed, and follow their children's academic progress at school. Their advantaged background also allows them to better care for their children's well-being, as well as their social-emotional and physical development outside school through sports, hobbies, arts and culture. It is, therefore, unsurprising that almost no policies and programmes are aimed at well-educated parents and families. Instead, such policies primarily target disadvantaged families and children. While some programmes aim to narrow the academic gap for these children, our review of both European and international policies and interventions reveals many other facets of vulnerability and disadvantage that children face around the world: extreme poverty and precarious living conditions, substance abuse by parents, parental incarceration, violence, and other severe circumstances. In light of these challenges, many programmes aim, first and foremost, to secure the basic needs of children: their well-being and access to education, as well as access to social services (housing, care). As a consequence, parental involvement in education is a less prevalent focus of such measures.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> However, despite the positive academic evidence, there remain sizeable differences between European countries with respect to the length of leave available to fathers (both paternity and parental). See (Table PF2.1.B. Summary of paid leave entitlements for fathers): [https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2\\_1\\_Parental\\_leave\\_systems.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, 'The compilation of evidence-based family skills training programmes' by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/prevention/family-compilation.pdf>



## Hard-to-reach parents and their “peripheral voices”

Parents from several types of families appear to be labelled ‘*hard to reach*’ in the literature that highlights teachers’ and schools’ perspectives on school-family partnership. These are families with **low socio-economic status**, **immigrant families**, and **single-parent** families. What unites them is the perception on the part of some schools and educators that these parents *lack skills and experience* (deficit model) and are *not interested* in educational progress of their children.

The overwhelming majority of barriers to the involvement of parents are those outlined in section above: parents’ own negative experiences in school, intimidation by teachers, lack of understanding as to how education system works, and of the expectations placed on them (Bæck, 2010). On a practical level, these parents frequently work shifts or have irregular schedules, and have nobody to look after their other children (especially in the case of single-parent families), as well as no language capital to follow the discussion or express their views (particularly in education systems where cultural mediation and translation services are not available).

One positive development that has taken place over recent years is a growing acknowledgment that the *deficit* discourse harms children and parents. Greater efforts are being made to provide insights based on research, and to redefine the discourse to reflect families’ real circumstances. One alternative would be for schools that have developed successful strategies to engage these families to share their experiences. For instance, the Dutch study on parent-teacher relationships provides useful insights (Leenders et al., 2018; Leenders et al., 2019). It is based on in-depth interviews with teachers working in mainstream, at-risk, and the special needs schools, and analyses the different strategies and methods that are applied across these three types of schools. Building relationships of trust with parents proved to be the most efficient and sustainable approach to involving ‘hard to reach’ parents. To achieve this level of trust, teachers relied on informal contacts, unscheduled classroom visits to the school by parents. They were also willing to reach out and work through problems together with the parents, thus helping the parents to feel empowered. Teachers in at-risk and special needs schools were open to making home visits in order to gain a better understanding of a family’s situation, or to facilitate initial contacts with parents. They were also willing to meet families outside of their formal working hours (*ibid.*).



### Box 3. Empowering parents through language learning

#### 'KAAP project' for Dutch language acquisition in Belgium

Jointly with local schools, adult education centres and the city administration, the NGO 'Schoolbridge' has initiated a project with the aim of strengthening parent-school cooperation in the city of Antwerp. The project is aimed at non-Dutch-speaking parents of primary and secondary school students, who are invited to enrol in language classes. Each group consists of 15 parents, who attend language classes twice a week in the same school premises. In addition, the NGO supports the schools by offering advice on better communication strategies with parents. An important aspect of the project is its emphasis on equal relationships between parents, educators and schools.

An evaluation involving 68 parents was carried out by the University of Leuven, and revealed positive outcomes. Parents reported that their communication with the schools had improved following their participation in the project. In addition, their knowledge and understanding of the education system in Flanders had deepened. The project is currently ongoing.

Ref: <https://www.deschoolbrug.be>

### Families with children with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN)

Parents of children with physical and learning disabilities face different educational challenges from all other families. The primary focus of these parents is on **inclusion in mainstream education** (Ravenscroft et al., 2017; Stalker et al., 2011). At EU level, the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020 acknowledged that children with disabilities and SEN are often not included in mainstream education, and called for their integration through inclusive education, coupled with individual support.<sup>6</sup> In addition to support from schools, these parents and children require help from social services, special educational services and medical services that recognise the special circumstances of these children. Teachers can become central figures for these parents, who address not only academic but also practical questions. The importance of these supporting services is highlighted in other studies, which show that parents – particularly the mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder and learning disability – are frequently subject to a high level of stress and at greater risk of burnout, which increases as children grow older (Tsermentseli and Kouklari, 2019). Without additional, specialised help, psychological and emotional strain takes its toll on parents who cannot then support their child's learning progress. In terms of parental involvement, such parents are more frequently involved in two-way communication with their teachers than are other groups of parents (Leenders et al., 2019; Tsermentseli and Kouklari, 2019). Teachers can provide tools and strategies tailored to the specific circumstances of these parents, and as a result help them to feel empowered and better equipped to address their unique challenges.

Furthermore, research underlines the importance of engaging parents in policy- and decision-making processes in education and other issues relating to SEN (Van Kessel et al., 2019). One such successful example comes from Northern Ireland, where the inclusion of parents was declared one of the important goals of the national Autism Strategy 2013–2020 (*ibid.*).

At European level, the Declaration on Autism adopted in 2015 by the European Parliament, underlined the importance of early diagnosis and intervention, based on existing scientific

<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eip/ageing/standards/general/general-documents/european-disability-strategy-2010-2020\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/eip/ageing/standards/general/general-documents/european-disability-strategy-2010-2020_en.html)

evidence. The Declaration also acknowledged the lack of early detection mechanisms among Member States, and encouraged further research into autism, and the identification of best practices to support adaptation to daily life among children and adults with this condition, as well as supporting their parents and families.

*Box 4. Early intervention programme for children with autism - supporting parents*

**Early intervention – Northern Ireland’s Autism Charity**

A programme from AutismNI encourages early childhood intervention through a specially designed programme that includes training in practical skills for the child, as well as training courses for parents and family members. The home-based programme lasts three weeks, with each meeting lasting one to two hours.

For parents – particularly those of young children, who are not yet familiar with autism – the programme offers both a better understanding of the condition, and suggests practical tools to manage the child’s behaviour, play, learning and socialisation. It provides helpful techniques to structure the home environment, set up and maintain positive routines, develop organisation skills and more. An important aspect of the intervention programme is the mobilisation of support groups for families at local community level. According to research, many parents of children with disabilities and SEN remain highly isolated in their daily lives, and greatly appreciate the acknowledgment they get from such support groups. Overall, the programme receives many positive responses from parents who have benefitted from it.

Ref: <https://www.autismni.org/early-intervention>

**Adoptive (and same-sex) parents**

To become parents, adoptive and same-sex adoptive families in Europe have to go through complex processes and endure emotional, legal and financial challenges (Messina and D’Amore, 2018). Their desire to become parents therefore comes from a strong commitment, and their experiences may not always compare directly with those of reproductively healthy heterosexual families. In the light of such circumstances, we would expect to find differences in engagement within this group of families. Our desk research revealed that studies focusing on parental involvement among gay and adoptive parents are rare in the European context, but studies do exist which analyse differences in parenting styles between gay and heterosexual families. For instance, gay fathers show higher levels of warmth and cooperation with their partner when becoming a father, in comparison to heterosexual fathers. Gay fathers also show no differences in the parenting style with respect to the gender of their child (Neresheimer and Daum, 2021). With respect to parental involvement, studies from other regions of the world, in this instance from Canada, show that gay fathers are actively and equally involved in education and cooperation with teachers. Their level of engagement is higher than that of heterosexual fathers who are comparable in terms of socio-economic background (Feugé et al., 2019).

### 3. Parental involvement at different stages of education

#### Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Parents and ECEC centres are key partners in the earliest stages of education and development. Quality ECEC, and its availability has received a great deal of attention and political support, both nationally and at European Union level (European Commission, 2021).

The *TALIS Starting Strong* survey, carried out in 2018 by the OECD, analysed the practices and experiences of ECEC staff in relation to interactions with parents about educational matters. Two principal dimensions were investigated: informal contacts with parents to exchange information about children's activities and development, and the encouragement of active involvement by parents in home-based learning activities. While informal contacts with parents are a regular practice in all countries, the practice of actively encouraging parents to engage in home-based learning activities is significantly less common among the European countries that took part in the TALIS survey, in comparison to other OECD countries. In Iceland, Norway, and Germany, this practice was evaluated as working "well" or "very well" by 40% to 65% ECEC staff, in contrast to approximately 75% in Israel and Korea. Another relevant question was asked to the heads of ECEC institutions, with regard to whether or not they offer workshops or courses on child-rearing or child development. Such a format for interactions is meaningful for two reasons: 1) it offers young parents, especially first-time parents, knowledge and tools that are age-appropriate and pedagogically supported; 2) it reinforces interactions between parents and educators, and between parents and children – both of which are meaningful for continuous parental involvement in the education of their child. Here too, there is room for improvement: between 50% and 70% of ECEC centres offer such opportunities to parents in Iceland, Germany and Norway (in increasing order of prevalence). In South Korea, the figure is as high as 90% (OECD, 2019b).

In addition to the traditional curriculum for specific age groups in ECEC, another way to include parents is to engage them in jointly creating **individualised learning plans**, as introduced in Finland (see Box 1). This may be a promising strategy to: 1) foster closer collaboration between teachers and parents; and 2) support learning and set objectives that are better suited to the needs of the child.

#### *Box 5. Case study of ECEC partnership with parents*

##### **Early childhood education and care curriculum in Finland**

Finland's approach to ECEC provides an example of parental involvement in curriculum development from the earliest stages of education. This approach underlines the importance of providing parents and guardians with opportunities to participate in setting objectives for, as well as planning and evaluating educational work within, pre-primary education. Parents are involved in developing an educational plan for their children, along with ECEC staff. They also jointly draw up a plan on how to achieve these objectives. Such direct engagement further encourages parents to follow the progress of their child, because they are thoroughly familiar with the curriculum plan. Staff also inform parents about the curriculum in the ECEC centre, as well as offering parents advice on how they can implement learning activities in a home setting.

Ref: <https://minedu.fi/en/early-childhood-education-and-care-services>

## Primary school

The start of primary education signifies a child's transition to a highly regulated and structured learning setting. This requires significant adjustment, both for children and for their parents. Parental involvement in primary education in Europe yields positive results in subjects such as reading and maths (see Boonk et al., 2018 for a meta-review). The activities that were associated positively with academic achievement were mostly home-based activities, such as reading together, providing the appropriate environment and materials conducive to learning, autonomy, supportive homework help, academic socialisation, high parental expectations and aspirations, and academic encouragement and support. Other activities can have either a negative or no significant effect on learning, such as academic pressure, homework control and homework help (*ibid.*). It should be noted, however, that there are both *functional* and *dysfunctional* strategies to help with homework. Dysfunctional help is based on controlling and interfering behaviour on the part of parents, which also appears to more negatively affect boys (Silinskas and Kikas, 2019). A functional way of helping is to offer limited and **indirect assistance, fostering motivation, autonomy and the development of learning skills, as well as teaching children self-efficacy** (Bräu et al., 2017; Silinskas and Kikas, 2019; Williams et al., 2017). Whether parents choose an effective or ineffective strategy largely depends on their own educational background (Bräu et al., 2017; Fitzmaurice et al., 2020).

Despite a general recognition of the importance of parental involvement, up to 15% of primary school teachers in the Netherlands, for instance, report low rates of participation among parents (Leenders et al., 2019). This Dutch study focuses on the strategies used by teachers in at-risk schools, and offers an encouraging example of successfully building two-way communication by adopting a sensitive, compassionate and encouraging approach towards vulnerable parents and using methods that build trust. These include the openness of schools towards informal contact, as well as outreach behaviours (Leenders et al., 2018). The trust built enables parents to be meaningfully involved in educational decision-making and home-based learning.

As discussed earlier, large differences exist between the countries and between schools in the implementation of parent-teacher and parent-school cooperation, with significant freedom being given to schools and teachers. Below is an example of a strategy in which a dedicated **liaison service** was set up to bring together parents and schools and communities in a **whole-school approach**. Originally set up in 1990 for primary schools in disadvantaged areas of Ireland, the project has grown successfully and now extends to a greater number of schools, both primary and secondary.

#### Box 6. The Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme

### **The Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme in Ireland**

The principal aim of the HSCL scheme is to foster partnerships between parents and schools, and to support children and families at risk of underachievement and school drop-out. Originally launched for three years in 55 disadvantaged primary schools, the scheme was evaluated positively and has been renewed several times. By 2005, it was operating in 470 schools and reaching 150,000 families annually. HSCL pursues five goals:

- Supporting marginalised pupils
- Promoting co-operation between home, school, and community
- Empowering parents
- Retaining young people in the education system
- Disseminating best practices

In recent years, the HSCL scheme has been included as part of a major education policy programme aimed at reducing socio-economic inequalities – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS).

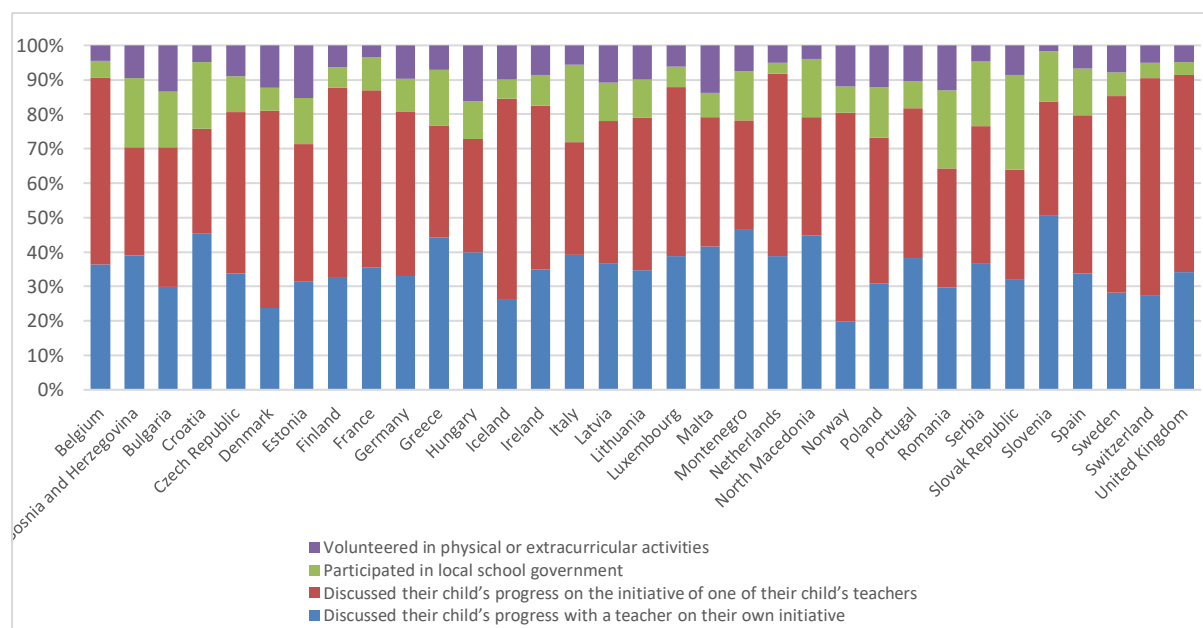
In their own words, “...the HSCL Scheme is the pioneer in involving the school in the life of the community and involving the community and its agencies in the life of the school.”

Ref: [https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/des\\_hscl.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/des_hscl.pdf)

### **Secondary school**

Parental involvement during secondary education revolves around a similar set of activities to those used in primary education: communication with teachers concerning academic progress, participation in local school governance, and parental volunteering in schools. The main difference between PI in secondary and primary schools is the frequency and the intensity of such involvement. As children grow, developing greater autonomy and taking greater responsibility for their own schooling, parents tend to reduce their interactions with schools, unless there are specific issues involving academic achievement or student behaviour (Skaliotis, 2010). The OECD PISA 2018 results show that, in particular, activities not directly related to learning, such as volunteering and local school governance, make up only a marginal part of overall involvement (OECD, 2020a). Most parental participation revolves around the discussion of children’s progress, initiated either by a teacher or by a parent. Notable differences exist between countries: in Eastern and Southern Europe, parents are more likely than teachers to initiate talks about progress, while in Northern and Western Europe, most discussions happen at the initiative of teachers.

Figure 2 Percentage of parents who participated in the following school-related activities



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table III.B1.10.1. (selected countries)

The two most frequently cited barriers to parental participation in school activities were not being able to take time off work, and meetings being scheduled at times that are inconvenient for parents. Other reasons included a lack of available childcare; parental doubts about the relevance of their participation in school to their child's development; as well as not knowing how to participate (ibid.).

Patterns of school-based involvement in secondary education provide a partial picture of parents' overall involvement in education. Home-based activities, which are strongly associated with academic achievement, are likely to be engaged in **more frequently at the time of specific educational transitions** and **differently between education systems** in Europe.

- In education systems with differentiated secondary education (otherwise known as 'tracking' or 'streaming'), the final year of primary school is a particularly important year in terms of a child's transition to an academic track, as opposed to a technical or vocational one. Such decisions are driven largely by the results of standardised exams, and in some cases parents are involved in the final decision. Many parents, knowing the importance of that year, tend to intensify learning support.
- Similarly, at the end of secondary education, where final exit exams determine a student's chances of admission to tertiary education, parental engagement is likely to be very different. A fast-growing trend in Europe, particularly among the upper-middle social classes and above, is the use of private tutoring (Bray, 2020).

## 4. Parental involvement in a changing world

### Communication strategies for a digital era

Technological advances offer alternative ways for schools to support parental involvement, particularly among those parents who are often labelled as 'hard to reach' (Goodall, 2016). This also applies to parents who have busy or inflexible working schedules, since communication via digital tools does not require them to be physically present at school. Importantly, such communication should be used with the intention *of involving* parents in the learning of their children, rather than simply *informing* them.

Evidence from evaluations of the use of digital communication for parental involvement suggests that it has positive learning and behavioural outcomes among students. Some of these tools can also be highly cost-effective for both schools and parents. One example is Texting Parents, a project carried out across 34 schools in England, and concerning children aged 11-14.

#### *Box 7. Communication strategies that work*

##### **Texting Parents (Bristol University and Harvard University)**

This project involved the sending of text messages to parents using school communications systems, such as Schoolcomms. These texts informed parents about the dates of upcoming tests, whether or not their children had submitted their homework on time, and what their children were learning at school. A total of 34 schools took part in the evaluation phase between 2013 and 2016, incorporating 15,697 pupils. The results show that:

1. Children whose parents were involved in the intervention experienced roughly one month of additional **progress in maths** compared with other children. This positive result is unlikely to have occurred by chance.
2. Children whose parents were involved in the intervention showed **reduced absenteeism** compared with other children. This positive result is unlikely to have occurred by chance.
3. Children whose parents were involved in the intervention appeared to experience roughly one month of additional **progress in English** compared with other children. There is no evidence to suggest that the intervention had an impact on science attainment.
4. **Schools embraced the programme and appreciated its immediacy and low cost.** Many respondents felt that the presence of a dedicated coordinator would be valuable to monitor the accuracy and frequency of texts. Schools should consider whether they would be able to provide this additional resource.
5. The vast **majority of parents were accepting of the programme**, including the content, frequency, and timing of texts.

Ref.: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/texting-parents/>



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## COVID-19 and digital learning

Among many other challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic produced an unprecedented change across Europe in the scale on which remote schooling was carried out from home during 2020, and in some cases, for shorter periods during 2021. With the pandemic still ongoing, scholars and policy makers are attempting to understand the medium- and long-term consequences of this disruption, both in terms of academic outcomes and children's well-being. Recently published research reveals **predominantly adverse experiences** among children and their parents. In the context of the pandemic, parents – overwhelmingly mothers – were confronted with the challenges of working (often full-time) and simultaneously caring for and being responsible for the education of their children, in addition to worrying about the health situation of their family members. Such conditions have been documented in many countries across Europe: in Germany, Ireland, Poland, and the UK (Flynn et al., 2021; Hipp and Bünning, 2021; Parczewska, 2020). Parents are frequently reported as being **unprepared and unable to adequately support** their children's academic learning (Vuorikari et al., 2020), or to motivate them to learn regularly, particularly of those in secondary school, or those with special education needs (Nusser, 2021). It is unsurprising that working parents, single parents, parents with multiple children, and parents of children with disabilities or special educational needs, suffered from **exhaustion and high levels of burnout** (Calvano et al., 2021). Some parents have admitted to **giving up with schooling** (Flynn et al., 2021). Parents of children with learning and physical disabilities, who rely on social and educational services, were affected to an even greater degree, as these support services became unavailable during the lockdown. Some parents were also surprised and affected by a lack of effort on the part of teachers to contact families and children, as discussed in studies carried out in Scotland and Germany (Couper-Kenney and Riddell, 2021; Letzel et al., 2020).

Maintaining contact with families during school closures was a challenge for many teachers, especially those with no previous experience with distance education. It led some teachers to 'inventing' and experimenting during such periods, as reported in Italy (Mantovani et al., 2021). In some countries, it appears that contacts with at-risk families were deliberately intensified during the lockdown period, as was the case in the Netherlands (Bol, 2020). Despite these efforts, reaching some parents proved to be challenging, especially those with lower levels of education and from minority-language families. The general explanation offered in the literature points towards i) a lack of financial means to set up the learning environment at home (e.g. a laptop, a printer, stable internet connection, etc.); and ii) the digital illiteracy of parents. While these arguments are valid, insufficient research has been carried out to explore the **voices of these parents** explaining what (additional) barriers they were confronted with during this period. A deeper understanding of the reasons for parents' withdrawal will be needed to inform any meaningful policy recommendations and future interventions.

Overall, a significant socio-economic divide across European societies has been documented in academic research into parental participation in home-schooling, learning time and the types of activities carried out during the lockdown periods in Europe in 2020 and during early 2021. In Germany, for instance, despite an overall increase in the amount of time spent engaging in PI by the parents of low-achieving primary school students, the gap remained significant in comparison to the time spent by the parents of high-achieving students (Grewenig et al., 2020). In other countries, secondary school students would often study independently, in part due to parents' feeling unable to help with the curriculum, as was the case with 25% of parents in the Netherlands (Bol, 2020). In France, 14% of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds received no help from their parents during throughout the period of distance learning during lockdown (DEPP, 2020). Time diaries further underline the differences between families: while learning time



in general decreased during schools closures by nearly 40%-50%, as reported in Germany and the Netherlands (Grewenig et al., 2020; Maldonado and De Witte, 2020), the drop in study time was more pronounced among children from lower-educated families, as seen in France and the UK (DEPP, 2020; IFS, 2020). At the same time, engagement in “detrimental” activities – such as watching TV, playing computer games or consuming social media – particularly among low-achieving students (Grewenig et al., 2020).

While positive experiences were also reported by families during the lockdown periods, such as a slower pace of life and increased time spent with family (Murray et al., 2021; Calvano et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2021; Mantovani et al., 2021), parents’ overall experiences with remote learning and supporting their children were largely negative. Among the main reasons cited for this was a lack of support from teachers and schools, followed by conflicting schedules between home schooling, work and other care duties (Calvano et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2021; Letzel et al., 2020; Nusser, 2021; Parczewska, 2020). Some parents felt they were left alone, and expressed frustration that schools did not take the time to teach parents what tools, strategies and skills they could use to educate their children, leaving them feeling “...useless, uneducated, low-skilled and completely guilty” (Couper-Kenney and Riddell, 2021:29). As a result, a sizeable population of students, ranging from a reported 20% in Denmark (Wistoft et al., 2021) to 61% in Belgium (Uit De Marge VZW, 2020), were left without support from their parents.

Certainly, many efforts were made by education ministries and other policy makers to support families in their efforts to support their children’s learning. Some countries built specialised websites providing online resources for students, parents and teachers – for example, “I learn at home” (*Aprendo in Casa*) in Spain.<sup>7</sup> These resources covered various levels of education, with additional resources being added on a regional basis. To date, insufficient evaluation-based evidence is available to form conclusions as to how helpful online teaching or technical resources have been for parents. Other countries, such as Luxembourg and Portugal, offered additional study materials to low-income families, such as desktop computers to primary and secondary school students, as well as help with setting up internet connections for families that did not have the means to afford them.<sup>8</sup> The availability of home study resources, as demonstrated in the case of Ireland, varies greatly between high- and low-income families, and cannot be overlooked (Murrey et al., 2021).

If the temporary switch to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as an experiment, providing insights about the readiness of education systems and families to switch to digital or hybrid (*blended*) learning, the amassed research evidence suggests that initial and continuous teacher training programmes should equip teachers with the necessary skills, and – perhaps more importantly – parents should be offered much more extensive support, tools, and resources to prepare them for an active role in a digital world. Until these challenges are resolved, digital learning is at risk of remaining a “sub-optimal substitute for face-to-face instruction” (OECD, 2020b:2).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://aprendoencasa.educacion.es>

<sup>8</sup> <https://digital-inclusion.lu/digital-inclusion-for-homework-students/>

## Conclusions: key messages for school education policy

This report highlights the importance of parental involvement to children's learning progress. Its call for parents to become more engaged in the process, and to co-educate together with schools and teachers, is based on congruent evidence of its benefits. At the same time, concerns remain among some scholars as to whether this growing focus on parents leads to shift in responsibility away from schools and towards parents when children fail to succeed (Byrne and Paseka, 2020). The assumption that parents are a homogeneous group, and are equally well equipped to support their children through the recommended home-based and child-centred approaches, does not correspond the reality of the diversity of families (*ibid.*). Other concerns, particularly those with regard to parental involvement becoming yet another source of social inequalities, in absolute contradiction to its initial purpose of equalising chances, have some grounding in empirical evidence. While middle-class families engage actively and meaningfully with their children's learning and thus become 'good parents', other families lack knowledge and tools from the start. In addition, they lack support from educators, do not consider themselves valuable partners in the process, or lack sufficient confidence to engaged – resulting in them being labelled "hard to reach".

The recommendations presented below are divided into policy messages addressed to the European Commission, and to national/regional educational authorities.

### European Commission

- The European Education Area 2025 prioritises and links the future of Europe to resilient and future-oriented education and training systems. In the key education priorities announced, such as tackling underachievement and early school leaving, the involvement of parents is mentioned in relation to education and decision making. This positive development offers an opportunity to move towards the wider recognition of parents as partners in education. Scientific evidence, both from within and outside of Europe, clearly demonstrates the positive role of parental engagement. A green paper or report on parental involvement in Europe, proposing a common framework for the involvement of parents, could potentially help to achieve two important goals. First, it would lead to the harmonisation, at least partially, of what constitutes a 'parent-school partnership', as well as identifying strategies to encourage parental involvement. Second, it would help to lay the foundations for the formal inclusion of parents in decision-making processes in education. Previous sections of this report discuss the findings that in many EU countries, parents are only marginally and symbolically involved in shaping education policies.
- Support should be given to further research on parental involvement, through the use of existing programmes such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+. Some of the projects identified during the preparation of this report offer extensive and valuable policy and research inputs generated by multinational research teams.<sup>9</sup> Several grey areas remain in which European comparative research would bring benefits in relation to future policies to support parental involvement. For example, the educational involvement strategies adopted by (full-time) working parents, and the actual decision-making capacity of parents are two examples of areas in which comparative research could deliver relevant insights.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, ISOTIS – Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society (<https://www.isotis.org/en/home/>); START – A Good Start for All: Sustaining the Transitions across the Early Years (<http://start.pei.si>)

- The identification of innovative and best practices in relation to parental involvement proved to be a somewhat challenging exercise during the preparatory stage of this report. Existing databases of ongoing and completed policy tools and programmes, such as the European Toolkit for Schools and the European Platform for Investing in Children created by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion<sup>10</sup>, do not cover all relevant educational programmes and interventions. Encouraging all educational stakeholders and practitioners to continue actively sharing relevant and innovative practices will further enrich and broaden future policy responses at European level. Another potential way to consolidate research and policy evidence across the Member States would be through an expert group of scholars and educational practitioners (e.g. a designated Observatory).<sup>11</sup>

## National authorities

- **Communication strategies should be revised** to include: a) the use of modern communication channels such as mobile phones to enable more frequent and personal communication with a concrete message or goal; b) the use of informal communication with parents to ease them into parent-teacher or parent-school cooperation through activities such as co-planning and co-organising school trips, festivities or other school events that do not focus on strictly academic matters; c) the use of intercultural mediators to enable the participation of immigrant and refugee families in the schooling process. The formalisation of such services at national level would be of both symbolic and practical value to such parents.
  - Importantly, teacher training programmes should also help teachers to become aware of the negative effects of hierarchical communication and power dynamics in their interactions. These are frequently cited as reasons for parents to become demotivated, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
  - The importance of regular and direct communication should not be underestimated. Evidence from during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that parents often felt unable to reach schools and teachers. For instance, some parents only received e-mails from teachers containing their child's next assignment, and were expected to send back assignments completed by their children on previous days. Little feedback or additional communication was involved in such exchanges.
- Teachers and schools can help parents by developing **clear and concrete plans and instructions** for parents regarding the forms and methods of meaningful parental involvement and parent-school cooperation, starting from as early as ECEC. Research evidence shows that parents in general respond very well to precise and detailed tasks, compared with vague and generalised expectations of engagement. Desk research confirms that while the national policies mention the involvement of parents, the definition of such involvement and its implementation is left to schools. As a result, approaches are rarely uniform or coherent –not only between European education systems, but also within them.
- **Helping parents to offer the right support** to their children might be a key area for policy interventions. Research confirms that certain strategies, such as controlling homework and placing too much pressure on children, are frequently detrimental to their learning outcomes. However, parents frequently have no other tools at their disposal. They should instead be encouraged to adopt strategies that **nurture children's motivation, autonomy and self-efficacy**, in order to offer the most beneficial and long-lasting effect. Helping parents to learn the right forms of support could be achieved through specialised workshops and short thematic

<sup>10</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1250&langId=en>

<sup>11</sup> We identified a previously existing Observatory. but it appears to be no longer active: <https://parentsparticipation.eu/en/observatory/presentation>

courses with a strong practical element. Regular opportunities should be offered for parents to bolster their skills and supporting strategies, if possible in the main languages spoken by parents within a particular school or school district, or using the support of cultural mediators. In addition, national and local educational authorities need to take into account the time constraints under which parents operate, and should be flexible with regard to the timing of such events (e.g. by offering evening courses, weekend courses). Again, experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed a lack of skills among many parents with regard to helping their children to learn and keep motivated.

- Teacher training and continuous education programmes should **equip educators with relevant, practical and up-to-date skills** to build and sustain parent-teacher dialogue and parent-school cooperation. Educators working in different types of schools (e.g. mainstream schools, schools in particularly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, schools for children with disabilities) are confronted with different challenges, and build valuable skills and resources to address them. For instance, a review of existing learning and training opportunities, such as **peer-to-peer learning**, in which teachers from different types of schools can meet to discuss and share their strategies, would form the basis for an especially relevant analytical and policy paper.

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