



# Linking home and school

## The background

When I first became Headteacher of Denbigh Infant School, home-school relationships were generally good. Parents appeared confident to approach the school with concerns about their children, and staff made every effort to listen and to resolve issues. There was, however, a lack of confidence on the part of many parents and they had a limited perception of their role in the education of their children. There was also a lack of parenting skills which we felt had a significant effect on pupil performance, and cultural/language differences sometimes made communication difficult – the majority of our pupils enter the school with English as an additional language.

As a staff we felt that improved home/school liaison was a priority. We identified four targets:

**1 To build up the confidence of parents**

**2 To improve parenting skills**

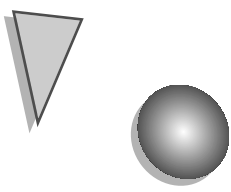
**3 To enable parents to support their children at home**

**4 To encourage parents to take a more active part in school life.**

This booklet details how we set about achieving our targets and how they impacted upon Education for Sustainable Development.



## Why home-school links are important

- Strong links between home and school provide good opportunities for teachers to understand children's attitudes to learning, their rate of progress and level of attainment.
  - Involving parents in their children's education helps to remove many misunderstandings and ambiguities about daily life in school.
  - A meaningful relationship between home and school encourages parents as partners and provides extra helping hands.
  - An effective and communicative partnership between teachers and parents establishes an environment where children have a sense of security, familiarity and cultural freedom which, in turn, enhances learning.
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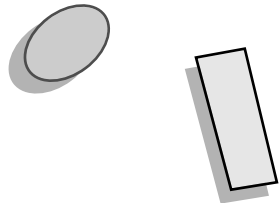
## What has this got to do with Education for Sustainable Development?

The ideals of sustainable development cannot be 'taught' in isolation – the whole school community has to be involved. Parents and teachers must be seen by children to share similar values and attitudes if there is to be a real impact upon the thought and actions of the children. We believe that the skills, values and attitudes outlined below, which have been identified as essential to ESD, also describe the ideal home/school relationship.

### Skills

- co-operative working
- critical thinking
- negotiation
- problem solving
- reasoned discussion
- informed decision-making
- creativity – an ability to envision alternatives.

### Values and attitudes

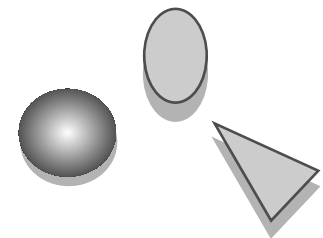
- empathy and an awareness of the views of others
  - an understanding of the place of individual and collective rights and responsibilities
  - a desire to participate
  - a belief that working with others can make a difference.
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### Building up the confidence of parents

Our local environment is one of bricks and cement. The school itself is old, there is no grass and the playground is small. Parents' day-to-day points of contact with school are the playground and the classroom entrances. We felt it was important that the school should be as welcoming and environmentally pleasing as possible for the parents as well as for the children.

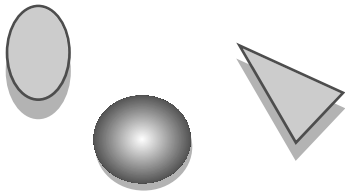


"Great effort has gone into making the school environment a very pleasant and stimulating area. The playground is particularly attractive. The pupils take a pride in their school's appearance." *OFSTED*



Over the last two years we have allocated money annually to improve the environment of the playground by erecting a more attractive perimeter fence, installing a safety surface, building a log train and additional climbing apparatus, painting playground markings and planting additional trees. Both inside and outside our school we have plants in every nook and cranny. A small courtyard provides an attractive central 'green' area and even the car park is edged with plant troughs and climbing plants. Either myself or the Deputy Headteacher is present on the playground from 8.50 am to greet and talk to parents.

The two entrances and main corridors of the school have been made tidier and more inviting. Pupils are actively involved in ensuring that these areas, as well as the playground, are maintained in a clean and tidy manner. Awards are given to classes who keep their cloakrooms tidy, 'special helpers' are appointed amongst the older children on a rota basis



and their efforts acknowledged in assembly. The treat for very good children is to use the special equipment to pick up rubbish in the dinner hour. Examples of children's art work is framed and displayed in the main entrance. Photographs and albums of school events and activities are also on view.

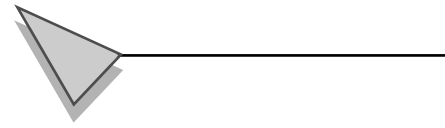
We have adapted a spare classroom to use as a Parents' Room and have tried to make it homely. Parents know where their activities take place and therefore enter with confidence. We hold a meeting of the Parents' Club once a fortnight and the programme of activities includes consultations when we ask parents for their views. There are also opportunities for parents to share their expertise with others, eg on behaviour management, as well as workshop and information-giving sessions led by school staff and other agencies.

We hold several social events each year such as the Christmas and Eid parent/teacher parties, Harvest Brunch and the Autumn and Summer School Fairs where parents and staff have opportunities to get to know each other. In our particular school differences of language often prove to be a barrier to good communication. Administrative and teaching staff with community languages are available every morning from 8.45 am and after school. Many parents are keen to learn English and consequently language classes are held four afternoons a week.

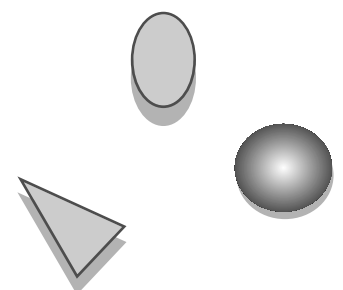
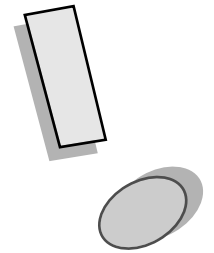
### Improving parenting skills

Children's education does not finish when they leave school at the end of the day. If we want parents to become real partners in the education of their pupils, then we must be prepared to spend time and effort in helping them to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to help their children at home.

Most of our parents do not value play as a way to learn and therefore do not promote it in the home, either by the toys and environment they provide or by playing with their children. Spending quality time with children, talking to them and doing things together does not appear to happen in many homes. There is also a lack understanding of health and safety issues, medical care and the importance of exercise and fresh air. It is within the Parents' Club that we try to address these issues. First aid, dental care, coping with common childhood ailments, safety in the home, car safety, walking to school, how to entertain your children in the holidays, and behaviour management have all been included on the agenda.



"Parents say that they value highly the education the school provides. They feel that the Headteacher and other teachers are very approachable." *OFSTED*



We also recognise that many of our parents bring skills, experiences and attitudes which have been lost in many of the homes of our indigenous children. Marriage and parenthood is for life, motherhood and family life are important, older people respected and babies pampered. The traditional diet is healthy, with plenty of vegetables and fruit. Most of the mothers are excellent cooks and have a good knowledge of herbs and spices. The 'throw away' culture is less evident and there is an understanding of making best use of what is available.

### Enabling parents to support their child's education at home...

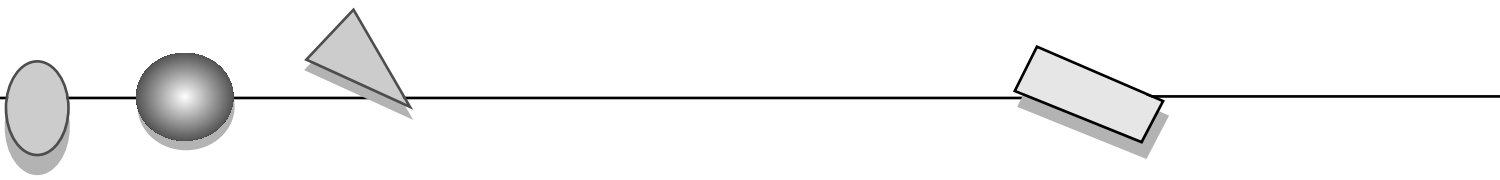
#### ...through a gardening club



"A wholly theoretical approach does not work. A mixture of theory, practical activities and modelling adult-child interaction seems to work best in supporting parents to help and educate their children at home."

*Headteacher*

We felt there was a need to build on the strengths of our parents and it was through our Parents Club that the idea of a gardening club was born. Several of the mothers complained about the cost of certain herbs and vegetables; others said that there is pressure from the children to provide junk food as opposed to more traditional fare. We took a poll of those who would be interested in finding out how to grow their own vegetables and herbs. When the response was positive, we talked to the Workers' Educational Association about providing a tutor, and applied for a WWF grant to start the project and to incorporate it into the curriculum.



The home/school liaison co-ordinator and the environment co-ordinator discussed the format of the club. Organic gardening was to be promoted. We also wanted to encourage parents to involve their children with gardening activities. Before the club started, we held an introductory session to help parents appreciate how children's involvement in gardening could help them to develop their skills and knowledge in science, geography, language and mathematics. This gave the project more importance in the eyes of the parents and perhaps gave them more confidence in their skills. (One particular problem we encounter is that many parents feel they cannot help in their child's education because they do not speak, read or write English). We had two raised vegetable beds erected in our nursery play area. This was protected from outside vandalism and, more importantly, the nursery children could watch the food grow and eventually harvest it.

The tutor not only taught the parents gardening skills, but also suggested ways to involve their children, emphasising the importance of passing on their skills. The format of the sessions was similar to other projects we have run in school. Firstly the mothers received training. Their children then joined them to work in a practical way under the supervision of the tutor and a member of the school staff. This provided a model that the parents could copy at home.

We looked carefully at our Schemes of Work and medium term planning, then highlighted and adapted them to ensure that the knowledge and skills the children learnt at the organic gardening club were built upon and shared with their peers back in the classroom.

#### **Links were made with:**

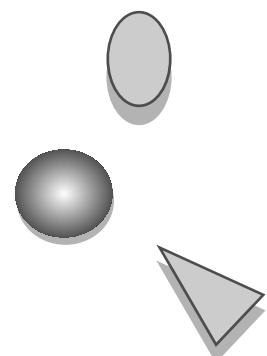
**Geography** – through work on our school environment and the uses of the building and land, including drawing birds' eye views (simple maps) of the vegetable beds

**Science** – in the unit of work on living things, “growing and changing”

**Personal, Social and Health Education** – there is much opportunity for discussion at ‘Circle Times’

**Speaking and Listening** – relating their experiences to classmates and encouraging their friends to ask questions

**Spiritual, moral, social and cultural teaching** – for example, in our Harvest Celebration.





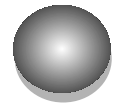
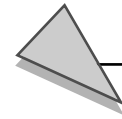
### ... through a recycling project

Our recycling project was another way in which we successfully involved parents in their child's education. The environment co-ordinator was involved in helping a local authority team to set up a recycling bus. When discussion took place about how we could organise a visit of the bus to school, we suggested that parents as well as children could be shown round the bus, so that they could talk to the children about it at home.

The children had a wonderful week. They were shown videos, and took part in discussions and in the various activities and computer games on the bus. All this was followed up in the classroom. Half way through the week, the parents were given a talk about recycling projects in the town and how they could educate their children into good practices. They were then given the opportunity to 'play' on the bus. We were surprised how many came to the session. The videos were in community languages, one of the presenters was an Urdu speaker (the language spoken by the majority of parents) and we arranged for an interpreter to be on hand for the other main community language.

The parents were very interested in the 'adult aspects' of the session, but not quite so interested in how they could involve their children, and only a few really joined in the activities on the bus. We felt that somehow we needed to capitalise on the enthusiasm of the children. It was suggested that for the rest of the week the bus would remain outside school until 4.30 pm so that children could invite their parents and other adult family

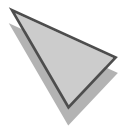




members. This proved a great success and we calculated that most children visited the bus with at least one family member. The feedback was good and it would seem that the presence of the children broke down barriers and stimulated conversation between parents and children.

"It's good to get out of the house and meet other mothers." *Parent*

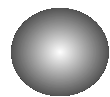
This was followed up by assemblies on caring for the environment, the introduction of bins in the classroom where paper and recyclable materials were placed, and the delivery of special red bins to the school for the collection of recyclable material. Thus the children are not only being educated in care of the environment both at home and at school, but they are also practically involved and aspects of their knowledge of 'materials' are being reinforced on a regular basis.



### **... through a Family Literacy Project**

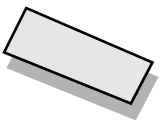
For the last two and a half years we have taken part in the Family Literacy Project. Parents are given the opportunity to increase their own basic skills in reading and writing. They then spend part of the session working with their children under the guidance of the tutor and a member of the teaching staff. If the parents attend the course their children are given extra one-to-one reading tuition provided by a trained assistant.

"That's the room where my mummy goes when she comes to school to do her lessons." *Child*

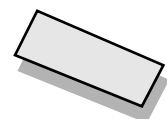


### **... through our Parents' Club**

As part of our Parents' Club programme we provide workshops on helping with reading, writing and mathematics at home. We talk briefly about the theories behind our approaches, help parents to make materials and teaching aids they can use at home, and teach them how to play appropriate games. The parents are also given the opportunity to see teachers and classroom assistants share books with children in the classroom or play mathematics, reading and spelling games. Visits to the library have taken place and we are planning a visit to a local friendly bookshop next term. We also have a mathematics games loan system, which has proved very successful and popular with older brothers and sisters who, through their own enthusiasm, are helping their younger siblings without realising it!



"Parents can see what we do and follow it up at home. I also appreciate the extra help." *Teacher*



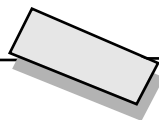
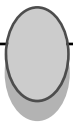
## Encouraging parents to take a more active role in the school

At the end of the last academic year several of our parents received accreditation for the work they had completed within the Family Literacy Project. These mothers wished to continue and work towards another recognised qualification. With the help of local agencies we have been able to set up a classroom assistant course in school. Part of the course is to work on a voluntary basis in a school for at least two hours a week. This has meant that we now have a parent in every class for some time every week. Other parents see them in the classroom which we hope will set a precedent.

Several parents have recently agreed to take part in a 'Reading Partnership Scheme'. They have received two days training which has prepared them to assist in developing the reading of pupils whose reading is judged to be slightly below average. Each parent has agreed to attend school for a short period three times a week.

Linked to our work on the environment, we had a whole school visit to Whipsnade Zoo in the summer term, involving almost 300 pupils. Obviously we needed a large number of adults to help and parents were recruited to look after small groups under the supervision of a member of staff. The response was excellent and on the morning of the trip the parents were given a short talk about looking after the children and interacting with them, and about the educational value of the trip. Despite this, we had many mothers who looked after their own child to the detriment of others in their care. Staff and other volunteers had to work very hard indeed to make the day fun and valuable for all the children. Parents on the Family Literacy Project were given a whole afternoon training prior to the trip, which prepared them well. In future we will continue to invite as many parents as possible to assist with school trips, but it will be stipulated that all helpers must attend a whole afternoon course if they wish to accompany us.

"I never realised teaching infant children was so difficult. I am finding helping in the classroom really interesting." *Parent*

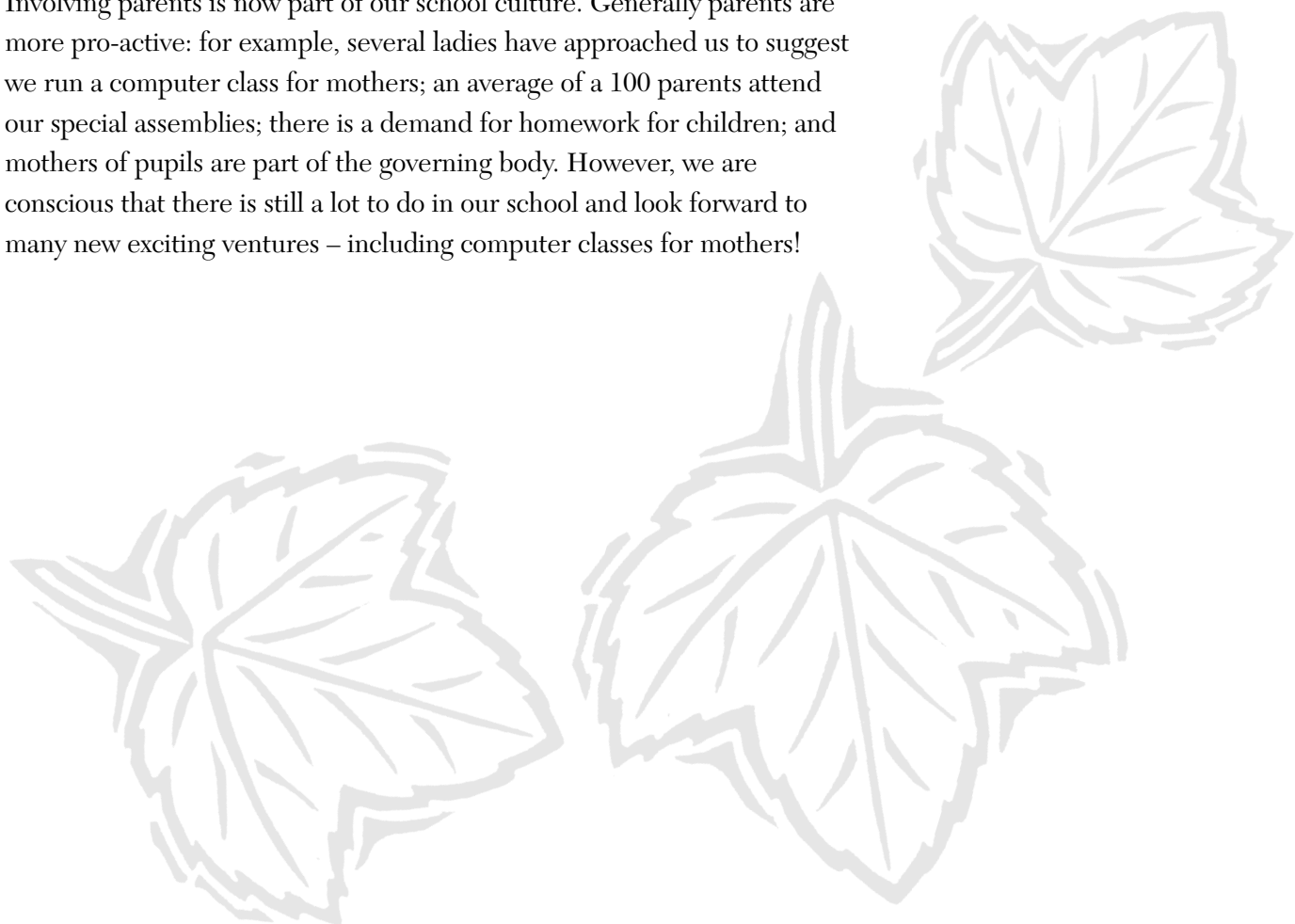


## Monitoring, evaluation and the future

This is perhaps the most difficult area to improve in our particular situation. Many families are large; consequently mothers are very busy and often have younger children at home to look after. Over the last few years we have actively sought parents to come in and help with reading, number games, sewing and cooking activities, but we have only a very small pool of parents who help on a regular basis.

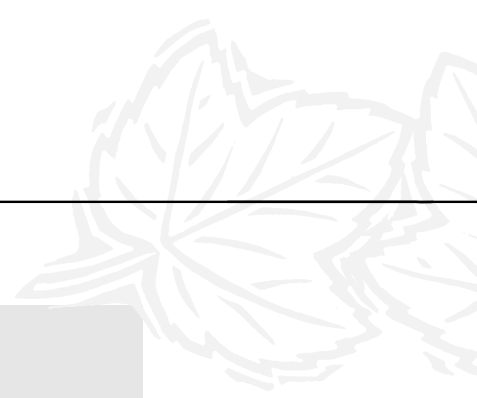
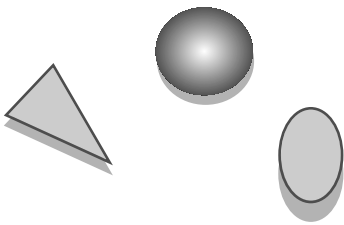
Monitoring and evaluation of our parent programme and individual projects take place on a regular basis. The home/school liaison co-ordinator records parental attendance at our projects, workshops, clubs and events. The co-ordinator and Headteacher meet once a term to review our work and discuss improvements to our provision for parents. Parent governors, tutors, and key teachers involved in individual projects are consulted regularly and at the end of a project. Parents are also consulted to gain an insight into ways in which the school can support them in the education of their children.

Despite many set backs and disappointments we have made remarkable advances in the last two years. Most importantly, attitudes have changed. Involving parents is now part of our school culture. Generally parents are more pro-active: for example, several ladies have approached us to suggest we run a computer class for mothers; an average of a 100 parents attend our special assemblies; there is a demand for homework for children; and mothers of pupils are part of the governing body. However, we are conscious that there is still a lot to do in our school and look forward to many new exciting ventures – including computer classes for mothers!



## Key factors in successful home/school liaison

- Take every opportunity to get to know parents.
- Work with the parents should ideally be mirrored by work in the classroom.
- Training for parents must be carefully planned with clear learning objectives. Pace and a balance of activities are as important as they are for the children.
- The timing of meetings must suit parents rather than the school. (We have found that 9 am is the most suitable time for them.)
- Consult and involve parents before establishing a parenting programme.
- Home/school partnerships should be an integral part of school development.
- The whole school needs to be willing to give freely of their time and to be flexible. (In our school, teachers have been willing to adapt timetables and cover for colleagues who are needed to deliver parent talks or workshops. Administrative staff have been willing to deal with the interruptions of parent enquiries, and general assistants have been prepared to take time from a busy schedule to provide tea and biscuits.)
- Do not be disappointed if the initial response is poor. Be prepared to relaunch a project to allow for the word to spread.
- Repeat a successful session – the response is usually good.
- The school must not be judgemental of parents who are late for events, do not always regularly attend a course, bring along screaming children or leave early – we do not know what pressures they are dealing with.



## **The school and its project**

Situated in the centre of Luton, Denbigh Infant School is an area of low socio-economic character. The school serves a catchment area where the majority of the population are from a Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage, and 95 per cent of pupils enter the school with English as an additional language. This case study aims to share the insights of Denbigh as it takes up the challenge of ESD, building up home/school links to the benefit of staff, pupils and parents.

## **Background**

The WWF schools' case studies series describes aspects of work undertaken by schools across the UK, whilst involved in WWF professional, curriculum and institutional development programmes.

This case study describes work undertaken with support from LAPIS – the Luton and Peshawar Initiative for Sustainability – run in partnership with WWF-Pakistan, Peshawar Municipal Corporation, NWFP Provincial Government in Peshawar and Luton Borough Council. This action research project aimed to share experiences and perspectives on sustainable development, increase participants' awareness of the interconnectedness of communities around the world, and stimulate good practice in schools. The project emphasised the importance of collaboration between 'developing' and 'developed' countries. This is one way in which WWF helps develop ideas for new teaching and learning approaches – equipping educators and students for thinking about and acting in ways supporting the goals of sustainable development.

For details of current curriculum development programmes, contact the Education division at the address shown.

### **Acknowledgements**

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Published by WWF-UK, Panda House, Weyside Park, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XR.

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