Over – coming barriers to engagement

Tips for overcoming emotional barriers

Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan

Ensure that the service is friendly, warm & welcoming to all parents and carers. (See Helpful Information - simple ground roles for meetings and events)

Communicate with parents and carers in ways that promote their confidence and self esteem. (Terms like ‘support’, ‘struggling’, ‘help’, can make parents feel judged).

Ask parents and carers how the service can make itself more friendly and appealing so that more parents and carers are more likely to engage.

Enable parents and carers to talk about their needs. Help them prioritise issues over which they can take some control. Help them identify effective courses of action that will help them overcome barriers.

Allow parents and carers opportunities to express their feelings. Help them to acknowledge and understand difficult feelings. If emotions come out, don’t ignore them. Take time to listen.

Recognise when particular or specialist help is needed. Ensure staff know how to refer parents/carers to appropriate services in ways that are supportive and non-judgemental.

Give recognition in a wide variety of ways. Praise parents and carers. Acknowledge their input (to their families, their communities). Say ‘thank you.’ Celebrate small steps. This will bolster parents’ self confidence and self belief and help build trusting and respectful relationships.

Offer incentives to engage with the service to get Mum’s, Dad’s, Grandparents and carers ‘through the door.’ Once engaged, put the right support, help and delivery in place to maintain engagement.

Train parent champions or ambassadors who live in the local community. Pay them to help other parents access the service or to support them when they begin engaging with the organisation. Remunerate their input and expertise, their time is precious and should not be wasted.

Provide new parents and carers with peer mentors and/or advocates, so that they feel more comfortable and less intimidated when they first engage.
Provide access to drop-in counselling, listening or befriending services. Make this available around the time that parents are engaging with your service (i.e. when coming in for appointments, educational opportunities, meetings, etc.) Signpost to support groups.

Use outreach – go to parents and carers. They will be more likely to engage if they are comfortable at familiar venues, e.g. community centre’s, children’s centre’s.

Get other agencies on board to support your service in overcoming any misperceptions, negative connotations or stigmas about it. Agencies can be good ambassadors for one another. Engage the third sector to achieve this.

**Tips for overcoming disinterest**

Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan

Find out why parents and carers are not engaging with the service. (Sometimes we assume it’s because they are not interested, but it may be for a variety of reasons – e.g. lack of confidence, practical barriers such as child care or transport, the timing of events, not understanding what is wanted from the interaction, assuming that what they have to say doesn’t matter or won’t be listened to, lack of trust in the service, fear of stigma, simply not knowing about the service/activity, is it what they want?) Act on this information and give quick feedback.

Ask parents and carers to tell you which new opportunities/activities they would like you to deliver. Have various means by which they can let you know (e.g. ask them at the school gate, set up a stand at the local supermarket, have a suggestions box, post a questionnaire/on-line questionnaire, set up a parent focus group and ask each member to ask 10 other parents and carers).

Set up a ‘We asked...you said…so we did…’ promotion offering additional family learning opportunities that the parent community have told you they want. Ensure you communicate this information in the same places you consulted parents (e.g. at the school gate, local supermarket etc, as well as at your premises) so that parents can see that you are genuinely interested in providing for their needs. Put out ‘good news’ stories in the local press describing how individual parents and families or the community have benefited from using the service. Tell them how they can join in. Contact corporate communications to explore outlets for this.

Make sure engagement is purposeful and promote the ‘what’s in it for me’ factor. Describe the benefits to parents and carers, the benefits to their child, the benefits to the local community, and the benefits to the service. (See Helpful Information - Your family your community, your voice… leaflet)
Allow **community events** to take place in your premises so that parents feel a sense of ‘connection’ and ‘belonging.’ Promote your services at these events in a number of subtle ways (e.g. display photos of parents and staff working together, put up an information display about your services, put up a calendar of events, have leaflets/events calendars/freebies advertising your service for parents and carers to take away). See design and print guidelines at

http://commsandmarketing.newcastle.gov.uk/content/design-and-print-guidelines

Advertise a **fun event with great giveaways** on offer (e.g. free pamper opportunities, free use of facilities, free gadgets, free vouchers etc.) Be mindful to promote them as non gender-specific - or have a female-oriented promotion and a male-oriented promotion - so as not to risk alienating mums/dads, grandparents.

**Promote your services** through an outreach approach.

Get **other agencies** on board to support your service in overcoming any misperceptions, negative connotations or stigmas about it. Ask them to **display some of your promotional leaflets/posters on their premises.**

**Tips for overcoming suspicion and mistrust**

**Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan**

**Spend time in the community** to develop a trusting relationship based on mutual respect. (Some parents and carers are suspicious about why services want them to engage and what is trying to be achieved. The more parents see staff in their community, the more they will become familiar with them.)

Ensure the **language** you use in **information leaflets, advertising materials and during engagement activities** is **safe and non-threatening.** (Some parents fear the consequences of being seen as needing ‘additional support’ or ‘extra help’, interpreting this as ‘being a failure’ or ‘being checked up on.’)

Use **language** that **respects and values** parents’ contributions to engagement opportunities/activities. Acknowledge and validate the skills, experience and knowledge that parents and carers bring along.

Think about **names and titles.** Make sure they don’t convey authority or make people feel inferior. (i.e. referring to staff or practitioners as ‘professionals’ implies
that parents are of a lower standing.) Work on a first name basis with parents and carers. Be equals.

**Show your human side** - sometimes parents just see staff as ‘officials in suits.’ Have **social events** to build relationships. This could include **parents and staff** bingo evenings, dance sessions, sports events and team building activities.

**Always start each interaction as a fresh one.** You or a colleague may have previously had a disagreement with a parent or carer or an uncomfortable interaction. Don’t make judgements based on previous interactions as this will fuel mistrust.

Develop an **interactive website**, where parents and carers can explore the inside of your organisation (take a **virtual tour**) and see the staff who work there. Put video diaries and blogs on the website to show who staff are. This will allow parents to become familiar with them from a distance at first.

Operate an **open door** policy or offer **drop-in access**, so parents and carers can ask questions ‘as and when’ they arise. By being there for them, you will develop trust and confidence. If your organisation cannot operate an ‘open door’ policy for safeguarding reasons, for example, try and put on a special drop in facility to invite people in.

**Train parents and carers who live in the community** to be **ambassadors** for your service.

Do some local advertising (including word of mouth). These parents and carers can help reduce suspicion or mistrust about your service and support parents when they first engage. They can also increase capacity significantly.

Do some joined-up work with **agencies that have already got trust** and good working relationships with parents and carers and the local community. Ask them to talk with parents and carers on your behalf. Invite these agencies to **use your premises** so that parents have reasons to come on site.

**Tips for overcoming practical barriers**

**Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan**

**Provide childcare** to enable parental engagement (ensuring provision is suitable for parents’ needs and not simply what the service perceives their needs are). Contact the childcare sufficiency team, Children’s service, Springfield centre.
**Provide transport.** This can work out cheaper than issuing petty cash when parents and carers who live near to each other can ‘double up’ in a taxi. This also ensures that parents and carers do not get anxious about finding venues that they may not be familiar with.

Offer to **reimburse** parents for childcare costs, travel and any other **out-of-pocket** expenses incurred as a result of engaging with the service. *(See Helpful Information - Expenses leaflet)*

Provide more **early morning and evening opportunities** to cater for parents who find it difficult to attend between 9am and 5pm. A good rule of thumb is to start a session/meeting/event after 9.30 a.m. and finish an event/meeting/session before 2.30 p.m. to allow parents and carers to drop off and collect children from school.

Hold **family fun events at weekends** so that children are occupied **while parents can engage with the service.**

**Allow children at meetings if they cannot settle in childcare arrangements** – provide toys or resources to keep them interested.

Devise **innovative ways** of engaging parents and carers that **don’t rely on them physically being on site** (e.g. phone conferencing, Skype, instant messaging, video demonstrations etc). Give parents and carers choices.

**Understand parents commitments** (i.e. shift working, shift patterns) and work flexibly with parents to allow them to engage. Don’t necessarily always run the same meeting on the same day at the same time.

Use **premises in the hub of parent and carer communities** to run education opportunities, meetings, forums etc. Ask parents and carers to choose the venue.

Work closely with a list of **local child minders** who may be able to create extra space as and when required. Try and build a relationship with the childminders so that they are familiar with parent and carer engagement work. *(See Helpful Information - Minded child form)*

Support parents and carers who need **specialist childcare** and help them to make those arrangements, contact [jacqueline.adams@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:jacqueline.adams@newcastle.gov.uk), 0191 2774605

Be more effective with time management. Double-up or even triple-up on the reason why parents/carers are coming in, their time is valuable and they are very busy people!
Tips for overcoming skills and language barriers

Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn't considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan

Boost your physical presence in the community. Do more out-reach to engage new parents. Don't rely on parents finding out about your services solely through written advertisements, posters and leaflets. Seek advice from the Northern Learning Trust, www.northernlearningtrust.org.uk

Ban jargon, abbreviations and acronyms. Use plain English when speaking and writing.

Be mindful of the reading level of parents and carers when making leaflets and other information resources. Use short sentences and keep the number of words over two syllables to a minimum. Check the reading level of your texts by carrying out a SMOG test. (Visit www.niace.org.uk/current-work/readability for more information.)

Ask parents to carry out a review of your leaflets, checking for readability. If you are producing a new leaflet/flier, try and ask a parent or carer to help design it.

Produce resources in a range of different media to increase accessibility. (e.g. digital media, video demonstrations, photo demonstrations, pod casts).

Produce resources in a range of formats (e.g. different languages, Braille, easy read, audio etc).

Print on pastel backgrounds to make text more accessible for dyslexic parents and carers.

Collect parents and carers views by conducting face-to-face or telephone interviews (thus removing the need for them to use literacy skills)

Subscribe to a language translation service for spoken translations and text translations.

Check parents and carers have understood what you have said by asking questions. Correct misunderstandings by using different words than you originally used to communicate the message.

Provide parents and carers with appropriate support (e.g. use pairings or group work, designate readers or scribes, provide advocates and mentors).

Provide opportunities for parents and carers to develop their literacy / communication / language / ICT skills in a safe, non-threatening environment.
Offer short workshops to develop other skills that will enable parents and carers to engage more effectively with the service (e.g. confidence and assertiveness skills, problem solving, team working etc.) This could be in-house training, delivered jointly to parents and staff.

**Tips for engaging more carers**

Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn't considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan

Make sure that **staff culture** does not exclude carers. Ask staff to use the term ‘parents and carers’, so that carers are not forgotten by staff or made to feel excluded by continuous references to ‘parents’.

Ensure that staff understand the **legal responsibilities** of carers.

Ensure your **communications make it clear** that your service is for carers as well as parents. Ensure that you make it clear that you welcome kinship carers, foster carers, special guardians, respite carers and all those undertaking a carer’s role, as much as you welcome grandparents, step parents and birth parents.

**Post** information and **advertise** engagement activities/opportunities to carers as well as natural parents.

Ask carers whether your service makes them **feel included**. Ask **what could be done differently**. Involve carers in **finding and being part of solutions**.

**Consult** and **involve** carers in reviews and service planning.

Ask carers if they need **alternative venues**. (Sometimes carers are prevented from using particular facilities as they are required to have restricted contact with a child’s natural parents.)

Provide opportunities for carers to be around other carers so that they can **share experiences**.

**Offer childcare** or **be flexible to having children present**. (Carers of young babies may have older children too. They may have a child - or several children - with special educational/emotional needs.)

Write **specifically to carers** about engagement opportunities. Treat carers as expert sources of information about children’s needs.
Be mindful of the **time commitment**. Ensure focus groups, meetings, partnerships are offered at times that are suitable for carers.

Develop a **carers network**. Draw on Newcastle’s excellent participation strand of the corporate parenting strategy, contact Helen white, Fostering Service, children’s Services.

**Tips for engaging more dads**

**Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan**

Ensure staff, mums, dads and carers **understand the importance of fathers and male role-models** on children’s educational, social and emotional development.

Make sure that **staff culture** does not exclude dads. Ask staff to use the term ‘**mums, dads and carers**’, so that dads are not forgotten or made to feel excluded or marginalised. Use this term in **printed materials**, rather than ‘parents.’

Make sure that promotional materials about your service contain **photos/pictures of dads**. Use posters with interesting images and messages **relevant to males**. Use **cartoons, captions and eye-catching headlines**.

Understand the **culture of ‘modern fatherhood’** Use catchy phrases (e.g. dads and lads, just for men, fathers’ day, fathers’ play).

**Ask dads what they want** (e.g. activities, venues, timings etc.) and **act on this**. Be **flexible** about meeting times to make sure you **don’t exclude working dads**.

Offer prizes, rewards or incentives that are **‘male-focused’** (e.g. football tickets, play station games, outdoor activities, DVD’s health & fitness magazines) to **encourage more dads** to engage with the service.

Provide opportunities to **access training** or **skills development** as an incentive.

Approach dads in terms of ‘**solution finders**’. Engage them through ‘competitions.’

Communicate in ‘male-friendly’ ways. **Keep messages short**. Talk about ‘**objects and things’** rather than ‘people and feelings.’ Use **strong positive language** like ‘results’, ‘success’ or ‘achievement.’

Increase your use of **new technologies**. Use more text messaging, blogs, face book, online polling. Use more **visuals**, videos, DVD clips.
Give examples of **how other dads have been involved and why**. Refer to male role models from sports or films. Use quotes from famous dads.

Communicate directly with **dads**. Ask for work/home details and send emails/letters.

Be mindful of **single dads** and **fathers living away** from their children. Consider how you can best meet their needs.

Put information in **places that dads go to** or **in magazines they read**. (Dads told us to put messages in newspapers and football programmes, and put posters in pubs, health centres, gyms, toilets and local shops.) Contact Fathers Plus for advice and information [www.fathersplus.org.uk](http://www.fathersplus.org.uk)

**Tips for engaging more parents from ethnic minority groups**

**Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan**

Ensure staff have training around **culture and diversity** and how this relates to engaging parents and carers. Ensure they are familiar with different cultural **norms and values** and respect these in all areas of engagement.

Explore and understand **cultural issues** that may act as **barriers to engagement**. Raise staff awareness and take measures to reduce or remove these barriers.

Find **existing trusted access points** into communities (e.g. individual mums, dads or carers, faith groups, social clubs, organisations etc.) Explain to them how your service benefits parents, children and the local community. **Ask for their help in cascading** this information and **meeting with** parents or groups of parents.

Make sure printed information is **available in different languages** (e.g. advertising promotions, questionnaires etc).

**Subscribe to a translation service** (e.g. Language Line) or call on the skills of **local interpreters** or **multilingual parents/staff**, to ensure effective communication can take place.

**Go into the community.** Invest time in relationships and **build trust**. Put the child and benefit to children and young people at the centre.

Use **innovative methods** to reach out, such as attending local festivals and events, running local community days etc.

Hold consultation events **on premises** people are familiar with (See the Children’s Services Directory online). **Recruit** people who **live/work** in the community you
wish to reach, to help organise and run the event.

Use practical and fun ways to engage. Hold events to bring people together. Consultation may be the secondary outcome of an event.

Advertise in the local community. Reinforce the message that parents matter and develop a two-way relationship with parents based on trust, respect and a commitment to improving outcomes for children.

Engage with faith groups. By working closely together, you may be able to extend your access to larger populations of parents who have received reassurances from people they trust, that your work is relevant to their needs.

Recruit parents from minority groups to help engage and support other parents and carers.

Offer skill building as an incentive to engaging with the service. Offer bespoke forms of support (e.g. ESOL classes, literacy skills, ICT training, confidence building etc.) or training to become mentors, advocates, service ambassadors. ESOL can be contacted on 0191 2986960

Tips for engaging more working parents

Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan

Be flexible with venues and meeting times.

Provide appointments after 5.30pm.

Keep meetings short, concise and to-the-point.

Run twilight education, consultation and involvement sessions.

Allow children at meetings (Working parents often feel that they have already ‘stretched’ the goodwill of childminders.) Provide toys or resources to keep children interested.

Pay for childcare to enable parents to attend evening or weekend consultations and meetings.

Offer lifts or reimbursement for out-of-pocket travel and parking costs.

Hold weekend fun events that all family members can come along to. Engage
mums, dads (or both) through information, education, consultation and involvement at the same time that children are occupied.

Devise innovative ways of engaging parents that don’t rely on them physically being on site. Make use of telephone conferencing for meetings. Make use of new technologies (e.g. instant messaging, video diaries, online forums, online polling, etc). (Speak to Lorraine Griffin, Children’s Services communications manager, Civic Centre, for advice)

Understand parents and carers commitments (i.e. shift working, shift patterns). Don’t necessarily run the same meeting on the same day at the same time.

Approach large local employers to support lunch time focus group meetings where parent and carer volunteers can collect parents’ views and ideas.

Create a relaxed environment away from your premises (e.g. hold meetings at the local coffee shop/community centre).

Send information to parents and carers through their workplace literature and workplace notice boards.

Develop virtual partnerships.

Tips for ensuring engagement is inclusive

Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn’t considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan

Encourage all staff and parents and carers to work within the principles of anti-discriminatory practice and valuing diversity. Provide knowledge and information that enables parents and carers and staff to avoid stereotyping.

Ensure the language you use is inclusive of mums, dads and carers. Don’t continually refer to ‘mum and baby’ or call staff/practitioners ‘professionals.’

Ask local mothers and fathers about their preferences for how and where information is presented. Act on their requests. (In our survey, Dads told us to put information in football clubs, barbers, pubs, local shops, newspapers, health magazines, on websites, blogs and face-book. Mothers said they get information from school, newspapers, parish magazines, local supermarkets, shops, play barns and activity centres. Both said they would like information at their place of work and through community networks. Both said they use e-mail and text.)
In cases where there is a family break-up, be aware of if and how both mum and dad want to engage with the service. Be mindful of different parents’ solutions – it may need planning and careful management.

Offer different ways of engaging with the service (e.g. telephone conferencing, text voting, visual imagery, audio etc.) so that working parents and carers or absent parents are not excluded.

Have events for just dads or just mums occasionally, but in the main ensure engagement opportunities are suitable and inclusive to males and females.

Be mindful of the different needs parents and carers have. Be aware of disabilities and take these into account when engaging parents.

Make sure venues are accessible to parents with physical disabilities and that specialist transport is readily available.

Provide appropriate support, access and resources to allow parents and carers to engage effectively. Provide materials in different formats and languages.

Subscribe to a translation service (e.g. Language Line) or enrol the skills of local interpreters or multi-lingual parents or staff).

Target information at parents and carers of all ages. Express the value you place on parents and carers of all ages, and the different experiences they bring.

Welcome and embrace the diversity of different cultures, values and beliefs.

Welcome and embrace the parenting skills of gay, lesbian and same sex parents and carers. For advice and information contact the Community Empowerment and Engagement Team Sian Broadhurst, sian.broadhurst@newcastle.gov.uk, 0191 2773487

**Tips for supporting parents to engage effectively**

Use this checklist to show which things you already take action on, and which you hadn't considered before and may need to think about. You could put these on your Action Plan

Be friendly and welcoming and make it as easy and as comfortable as possible for parents and carers to engage and stay engaged. Concentrate on building confidence and developing trust.

Run some fun activities for parents/carers and staff to do together. Let them see your ‘human’ side.
Provide parents and carers with **mentors, points of contact and parent advocates** to help them engage and stay engaged with your organisation.

Don’t be judgemental or over-prescriptive. **Recognise parents’ skills** and help them to acquire new ones in ways that are fun and non-threatening.

**Pair parents** to do things together (e.g. support one another, give reminders etc).

Use **role play** and/or **skills shadowing**.

Explain **why** it is important for you to hear their views and ideas. Emphasise **how this helps other parents/carers and children**.

Take **small steps**. Gradually get parents and carers engaged. Don’t overwhelm them by overloading them the first time they engage.

Have a **named contact** in the organisation that they can go to, text or phone, for further support and guidance.

Provide **training** to parents to build skills that will help them to engage effectively (e.g. confidence and assertiveness training, team building exercises).

Offer **incentives for continued engagement** (e.g. vouchers or free use of facilities after 3 months, 6 months, 12 months, etc.)

Send **text reminders** (or ‘tweets’) to encourage parents to remain in contact.

**Ask parents and carers** what further support or activities they would like you to provide.

Remove **practical barriers** to engagement (e.g. provide childcare and transport to venues or reimburse parents for any **out-of-pocket** expenses).

Operate an **open door** policy or offer **drop-in access**, so parents and carers can ask questions as and when they arise.