

## Creating a Positive Learning Environment: Building a Relationship with the School

By Karen Starkiss- Dyslexia Assessment and Support Services

Educational researchers consistently advocate the benefits of partnerships between schools, families and communities as a way of improving outcomes for children and young people.<sup>1</sup>

In Australia in 2008 ACER completed a report which aimed to provide a context for the evidence base for the National Australia Bank's Schools First Awards. The report detailed research that demonstrated education partnerships can make a significant difference to the learning, development and health outcomes of children and young people.<sup>2</sup>

It also showed that effective partnerships provide mutual benefits for schools and the broader community.

In Australia, ACER, along with other education researchers around the world, have highlighted the broader benefits of education partnerships, some of these are detailed below.

- Improvements in reading skills and higher overall academic achievement
- Lower drop-out and higher attendance rates.<sup>4</sup>
- Improvements in students' readiness to learn
- More responsible preparation for class, positive impacts on homework completion<sup>4</sup>

- Improved transition, to and from school and also from alternative learning settings to mainstream school
- Providing learning opportunities that develop both academic and non-academic competencies <sup>5, 6</sup>
- Better access and equity to targeted support for children and young people and their families.
- Opportunities for enhanced leadership and decision-making experiences

For more information see

[www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/community/evidenceandbenefits.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/community/evidenceandbenefits.pdf)

So, what is the best way for parents of children with learning difficulties/disorders to work in partnership with a school?

Here are some suggestions:

If your child is at Primary School

Talk to the class teacher first because:

- She/he teaches your child every day
- She/he may also have concerns
- There may be things that the school is already trying that you are unaware of
- Ultimately, he/she will be the one who implements and manages any new recommendations
- Going behind his/her back may undermine her and that might not be the best start!

## Before the Meeting

Whether your child is in primary or secondary school:

- Make sure that you make an appointment: there is nothing worse than plucking up the courage to go to school (if you are nervous) and then the teacher cannot see you or can only give you 5 minutes of her time because they have a meeting to go to.
- Write down your questions and concerns before you go to ensure that you cover everything
- Talk to your child and find out what they most enjoy at school and what they find difficult
- If there is anything that your child has produced that will help you explain their difficulties take that in with you
- Make sure that you take in copies of all reports or relevant information to share with the teacher

## At the Meeting:

- If you are nervous, and some of us are due to our experiences at school, consider taking a relative or friend with you
- Tell the teacher at the start if you find meetings difficult
- Tell the teacher that you want to work in partnership with the school and therefore want to talk about your concerns, listen to the teacher and then plan together the best way forward.
- Consider and value what your child's teacher does well and start off with this. The teacher may also be feeling nervous and therefore it is best to start with a positive.

- Ensure that you refer to your notes to make sure you cover all of your concerns
- Tell the teacher what your child enjoys and how they learn best at home
- Listen to the teacher's points of view and what they intend to do to support your child
- What you want is the best for your child however, what you want may not be the best for your child. For example, many parents see their child struggling and think that keeping them back a year will be the best option however, research tells us that this is one of the most ineffectual ways to try and improve a child's learning and in fact, on average, they regress and their self-esteem suffers as they see the younger children in their class overtake them
- Be open to other suggestions the teacher offers; it may be a better solution than the one you had in mind.
- Take time to think. It's ok to go away and consider what has been said and to come back with your response.
- Remember changes take time to work

#### If you have a Specialist Report

- Tell the school
- Give the teacher time to read it; remember there is a lot of information and it takes time to read and digest.
- Agree with the teacher that you will give him/her two weeks and then would like an appointment to see what the school will do to support your child in light of the report.

- Discuss the report, focus on the positives first
- Talk about priorities and highlight the important parts
- Understand that recommendations may have to be introduced gradually
- Ask how the school intends to alert all teachers working with your child to the recommendations. This is particularly important in secondary schools: if your child needs to sit at the front of the class, shouldn't copy from the board, needs verbal instructions to be chunked etc. then the history teacher, science teacher and art specialist need to know too.

### Your Rights and Your Child's Rights

- If your child has a diagnosis of a SpLD you are entitled to a Student/Parent Support Group, which means that each term you can meet with your child's teacher and other professionals working with your child at the school to discuss your child's progress and the way forward.
- Ask that Minutes or Notes are made at the group. These may help with accommodations that your child will need in any formal and informal exams
- Make yourself aware of the accommodations your child is entitled to in their SATs, NAPLAN or Year 12 exams for example and ensure that the school has requested these in good time.
- The School is strongly encouraged by Departments of Education to produce an Independent Learning Plan for your child with three to four achievable targets. Ask for the ILP to be shared with you so that you too can help your child focus on these and achieve them at a faster rate

- If you are unhappy with the responses from the class teacher or head of year you are within your rights to ask to speak to the Head of Integration or the school principal.
- In the event that you are unhappy with the provision for your child you may consider changing schools. This has to be carefully thought through and it is important to again write down what you are looking for and the questions you want answered. Schools are not allowed to tell you that they don't or can't cater for children with an SpLD

### Advising and Supporting the School

Co-operation between you and the school will be beneficial all round.

- Ask how you can help
- If this is not already provided, ask if you could have a home/school book so that you can correspond with your child's teacher particularly about any successes and also anything your child finds very difficult for example if the reading book is too hard, if they took 2 hours to complete homework that was meant to take 30 minutes
- Offer to support the school if necessary, and if you can, with technology, software or extra books
- Offer to spend time on activities recommended by the school

### Involving Your Child

- Your child needs to know about his/her learning difficulties, the school may be able to help with this
- Ensure that they know what is being planned to help them at school

- Make sure that they know what their targets are. It would be beneficial for them to be included in the target setting
- Tell your child how the family and school will work together

### On-Going Support

- Email or write to the school summarising what you believe was agreed and the goals that were set
- Include in your correspondence what you have agreed will be your role and the role of the school
- Ask when the next meeting will be
- Ask what is the best way to communicate
- Ensure that each year the new teachers are aware of your child's

1. Hands, C 2005, It's Who You Know and What You Know: The process of creating partnerships between schools and communities  
<http://www.adi.org/journal/fw05/HandsFall2005.pdf>
2. Australian Council for Education Research, 2008 Schools First Final Report.  
<http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au/docs/schools-first-evidencebase-acer.pdf>
3. Centre for Child and Community Health 2006 Linking Schools and Early Years Services: Final Report. Melbourne Centre for Community Health.
4. Epstein 2005 Developing and sustaining research-based programs of school, family, and community partnerships: Summary of Five Years of NNPS Research, Centre on School, Family, and Community Partnerships. National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), Johns Hopkins University.
5. Research, Economic and Corporate Strategy Unit 2003, Key Findings from the National Evaluation of the New Community Schools Pilot Programme in Scotland, Scottish Executive Education Department, Edinburgh.
6. Bond, S 2009, Learning Support Programs: Education reform beyond the school, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Melbourne. 14 Blank M, Melville A and Shah B 2003 Making the Difference Research and Practice Community Schools. Washington Coalition for Community Schools. 15 Blank M, Melville A and Shah B 2
7. From [www.australia.teachingandlearningtoolkit.net](http://www.australia.teachingandlearningtoolkit.net)