

Enquire within

THE NEWSLETTER BULLETIN OF ENQUIRE, THE NATIONAL INFORMATION AND ADVICE SERVICE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The theme of Enquire's second bulletin is one that reflects a fundamental objective of the service – promoting effective partnerships between families and professionals in the field of special educational needs (SEN). Parents of a child with SEN often wish to, or are expected to, participate in decisions taken about their child's education. In order to encourage the development of good working relationships, local authorities must be committed to this objective and ensure staff are in a position to foster such relationships. This bulletin looks at the stated commitment of many authorities to partnership with families, and outlines a range of partnership styles currently operating in Scotland.

Councils committed to partnership in SEN work

Special educational needs policies adopted by Scottish Councils since local government reorganisation in 1996 show many similarities, including a commitment to:

- inclusive, locally based education;
 - targeting resources at those most in need;
 - developing behaviour support services;
- and importantly...
- partnership with all those involved in the SEN process.

Authorities' understanding of 'partnership'

Different authorities have differing perceptions of what is meant by partnership, but most consider effective consultation and provision of information important, whilst some also refer to the importance of enabling family members to participate fully and make informed choices. For instance, West Dunbartonshire's SEN policy *Meeting the challenge: making the changes* states:

"All parents will have the opportunity to make real choices about the educational provision that they wish for their child. In order to make such choices parents will be offered expert advice and information and arrangements made for counselling and additional support where necessary."

And in East Renfrewshire:

"East Renfrewshire Council will recognise the importance of parental choice in the provision of their child's education and maintain a range of

provision to allow parents to exercise that choice."

In Stirling Council's policy *Breaking down the barriers: access to learning for all children* there is a commitment to consulting children themselves, as well as parents:

"Your children's views should be considered when decisions are made about their education. Children's views will always be taken into account."

Barriers to achieving partnership in practice

However, whilst explicit policy may be to work in partnership with families, in our experience, sometimes factors come into play that make partnerships difficult to achieve in practice. These include:

- differences in perceptions, emotional involvement, language and knowledge between professionals and families eg, different expectations of how long it will take to reach a decision/provide a service etc;
- pressured workloads resulting in professionals feeling too stressed or busy to work at building effective partnerships with families;
- pressure on existing resources, and in some areas the lack of suitable provision may mean parental choice is difficult to achieve;



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Children
IN SCOTLAND



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Update on developments at Enquire

Since launching the Enquire helpline on 1 November 1999, at Donaldson's School for the Deaf, helpline staff have dealt with over 300 enquiries relating to special educational needs issues. Many of these are fairly complex cases, involving a range of issues. In a future issue a breakdown of these statistics will be provided to show the types of enquiries we are receiving. Families are encouraged to access this resource.

A programme of local events has now begun, and events are currently being organised in a range of local areas. Events have been held so far in Stirling, Dumfries and Galloway, West Lothian and Edinburgh. If you are interested in attending a local event in your area contact Julia Wilson, Enquire's training and development officer on 0131 222 2424. Enquire's first national annual event will be held this May in Glasgow. For further details contact Enquire.

Later this Spring, Enquire and the Scottish Executive will jointly launch the document *A parents' guide to special educational needs*. This will be sent to all schools, local authorities and Health Boards in Scotland, and will be available free of charge to all parents of a child with special educational needs. If you are a parent and would like a copy of this document, call Enquire's administrative assistant on 0131 222 2425.

Over a third of Scottish councils have expressed an interest in principle to become involved in pilot mediation projects, and we are about to meet key players in selected authorities with a view to identifying which four authorities to work in. We hope that by the end of March 2000 we will be well on our way to developing these schemes.

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- lack of professional expertise in consulting with children who pose communication or relationship difficulties.

Family members – rather than feeling a 'partner' – may end up feeling disempowered and ignored if not kept fully informed of decisions being taken by professionals.

Therefore, if partnership is a real objective of education services, it is vital they consider how to address any existent barriers.

At Enquire, we hope that recommendations to encourage partnership outlined in the national guidance (SOEID, *Children and young persons with special educational needs*, Circular 4/96) will also be incorporated into practice, in order to minimise the impact of barriers such as those noted above. These include:

- encouraging the involvement of parents and children or young people beyond the statutory minimum;
- information given to parents and their children on their rights and how they can participate in the educational process;

- giving the family contact details of a person employed by the authority who can provide advice and information;
- promoting frankness and openness during the Recording process;
- offering a range of provision to cater for a range of needs and preferences.

The acid test

It is reassuring to know that many Scottish authorities are stating publicly that partnerships between families and professionals are critical to the overall success of their SEN approach. If planning at local level is effective, then the policy of partnership should be evident in the way services are provided, how professionals relate to families and in planning for the future. This will be the acid test of how meaningful the commitment to partnership actually is. Whilst partnership is easy to claim on paper, in reality, it is a complex and ongoing process requiring much effort and constant self-evaluation on the part of professionals, as well as families.

USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

Record of needs

Advice and information on the Record of needs process, including when and how one is opened, assessments undertaken and appeals procedures. Free. (Enquire factsheet no. 1, 1999)

Individualised educational programmes (IEPs)

Outlines what an IEP is, when and how they are opened, and ways they can help children with special educational needs progress and develop. Free. (Enquire factsheet no. 2, 2000)

A parents guide to special educational needs

A comprehensive and up-to-date guide to the education system and children with SEN, listing the rights of parents, useful organisations, and how to become more involved in a child's education. Free (Enquire and the Scottish Executive, 2000 - forthcoming)

Your future needs assessment

Booklet for young people on how to become more involved in the Future Needs Assessment. £2.95 + 50p p&p (Children in Scotland, 1997)

Enabling the participation of children with special needs through citizen advocacy

Written by Marjorie Arthurs of Partners in Advocacy, with the support of Quarriers, this booklet provides an interesting insight into the role and benefits of citizen advocacy. It considers barriers to participation, the citizen advocate's code of practice, and their role in meetings. £3.50 + 50p p&p (Children in Scotland, 1998)

Onwards and upwards: involving disabled children and young people in decision making

Practical manual providing training and discussion materials for trainers to use with professionals to promote the involvement of disabled children and young people in decisions that affect them. £25 + £2.95 p&p (Children in Scotland, 1998)

Available from: Administrative Assistant, Enquire, Children in Scotland, Princes House, 5 Shandwick Place, Edinburgh. Tel: 0131 222 2425.

Please make cheques made payable to 'Children in Scotland'. Sorry no invoices under £10.

Typetalk Enquire: 0800 959 598

Partnership models in special educational needs

This article explores different partnership approaches operating in Scotland to support families when working with professionals, to ensure an appropriate education for a child or young person with special educational needs. It will briefly consider advantages and disadvantages of different models in use throughout Scotland.

One reason for promoting family support is to encourage effective participation when families are involved in decisions taken about a child's special educational needs.

The type of decisions taken between families and professionals may include: the type and degree of needs the child has, the type of educational placement necessary, the type of services the child needs to help them access the curriculum, and how best to plan or review the child's educational progress.

Families may feel they need more information or help in order to contribute to such decisions, and can then seek someone who can assist them. Enquire can help link families with local advocacy services or support groups in their area (where these exist) that can provide practical input and advice. The nature of their involvement will depend upon what type of partnership they offer.

Criteria for acting on behalf of another

Someone acting on behalf of a family member must ideally be able to:

- communicate effectively with professionals verbally and in writing;
- seek clarification on issues or terms that are not understood by the family;
- gather, and make use of, information from a number of sources;
- be a good listener and empathise with parties involved;
- ensure the parent or child's opinion is heard in meetings, regardless of their own view;
- be prepared to commit the time and energy, often on a long term basis;
- be independent ie not professionally involved with the family.

Finding someone with all these qualities is not always easy. Sometimes, the only available option may be a family member themselves, or someone with whom the child or parent feels comfortable and who is prepared to give them time and support. However, often this can be enough. The chosen partner can be anyone at all, but it helps if they are knowledgeable on SEN matters.

Summary

There are various partnership approaches available to families of a child with SEN, to assist them work alongside professionals when decisions are being taken about the child's education. Some of the factors to consider when identifying someone to assist a family member become involved in a child's education have been outlined briefly. Whilst there may only be a small number of individuals supporting families of children with special educational needs in a formal capacity, there are still other options that can be considered to encourage effective partnerships with professionals to develop.

If you are aware of any good practice in the area of partnerships in SEN, please write in with your examples and we will publish them in a future edition of the bulletin.



Enquire

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Advantages and limitations of different partnership approaches

The table below indicates some of the advantages and disadvantages of different partnership approaches. Families may wish to combine some or all of these support mechanisms at different stages of a child's development.

	Advantages	Limitations
Named person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is recognised in law • The role of a Named Person is to provide information & advice during the Recording process • Are usually knowledgeable about the SEN system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only tends to become involved when a child is being considered for a Record of Needs • Is not easy to find. (There are a small number of experienced Named Persons in Scotland) • Only represents views of parents, not child
Mediator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can resolve conflicts in many areas of SEN • Can promote greater understanding between families & professionals • A quick & cost effective way of resolving conflicts • Can help avoid litigation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will require both parties to be prepared to make compromises • Does not address past conflicts (this can be an advantage too) • Is hard to find (although Enquire is establishing some local schemes) • Needs to ensure both parties have the authority to make decisions
Advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be obtained through a variety of agencies • Can assist the family member on a longer term basis • Can work across agencies & in many aspects of SEN • Can assist in the early stages of involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has no legal status of involvement • Has no binding commitment - advocacy services may not have the remit to fulfil all of the family's advocacy needs • Some advocacy services may adhere to particular principles & may only be suitable for people who agree with these views
Self advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be an empowering experience for the family • Can gain knowledge and skills useful in the long term • Can help other families after developing their skills & experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May create extra stress and more work • Can detract from other time for other things, eg spending quality time with the family • Can be hard, when a person is emotionally involved with the situation
Family supporter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be anyone, even a friend or neighbour • Is likely to know the family and child well • May be able to assist perform tasks such as information gathering contacting people, letter writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not be very familiar with the education system • May not have the skills required to assist communication between families and professionals • As a result of above, may not give informed views



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