



Working in Partnership with Families:

Research Report for New Siblands School

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Summary

This report highlights the key findings from research exploring how New Siblands School works in partnership with families, in order to help the school celebrate good practice as well as continually improve. The research involved an online survey to parentsⁱ, a focus group with teachers, and follow-up interviews with parents. The report focuses on two key areas: current relationships between parents and the school, and recommendations for enhancing relationships. Aspects of current relationships include parents' satisfaction with the school, parent-school communication, parents' involvement at school and home, and trust between parents and the class team. The recommendations for enhancing relationships centre on more comprehensive and tailored communication between parents and the school, enabling contact with the whole class team, more opportunities for parents to visit the school, greater support for children's learning at home, and creating a support network for parents. Key areas of good practice that should be celebrated include the opportunities and activities offered to children by the school, and the attitude and commitment of staff.



ⁱ The report refers to 'parents', but this also includes other guardians of children at New Siblands School

1. Introduction

A partnership approach to parent-school relationships is advocated in both mainstream and special education, in order to improve educational and life experiences for children.¹ Successful relationships between parents and schools can enhance the well-being and progress of the child,^{2,3} particularly as collaboration between parents and teachers is critical in determining goals and behaviour strategies for children with special educational needs and disability (SEND).⁴ Interpersonal elements are proposed to be key in building successful partnerships, including effective communication, trust, and parental involvement with the school, and in their child's learning at home.^{5,6,7}

New Siblands School wishes to work in partnership with families, and values relationships with families very highly. This research aimed to celebrate good practice at the school and also enable the school to develop in line with its desire to be continually improving. The study explored parent-school relationships through an online survey to parents (which gained 30 responses), a focus group with 3 teachers, and follow-up interviews with 5 parents. The research was conducted by Dr Sara Spear, who is a member of the Bristol Leadership and Change Centre at the University of the West of England. The Centre carries out research which informs and shapes organisational practice, and the researcher's own background is in organisational communication and relationships. This combined with the researcher's desire to engage with organisations in their local community led to the conception of this project with New Siblands School.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of the West of England ethics committee. Participation in the study was voluntary, and full information about the research was provided to individuals before they agreed to participate. The data collected was anonymised, treated as confidential, securely stored, and accessed only by the researcher. For further details of the methodology, see Appendix 1.

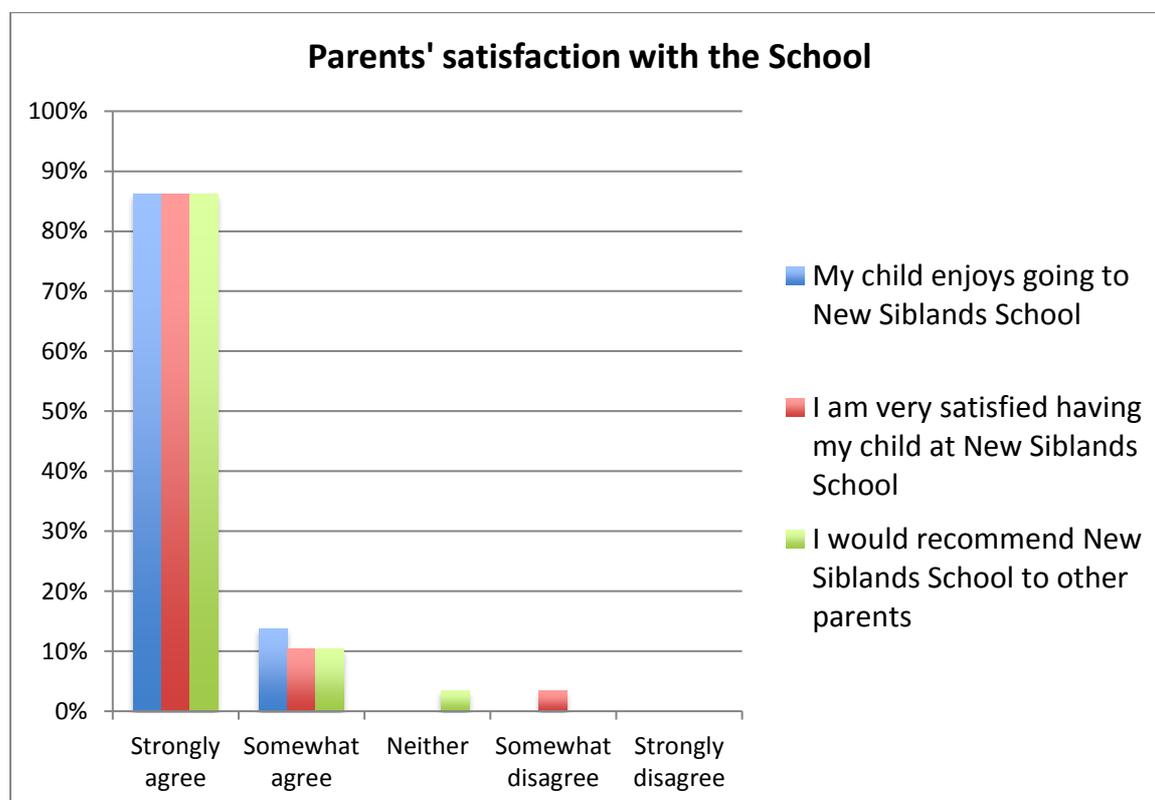
This report highlights the findings of the study, focusing on two key areas: current relationships between parents and the school, and recommendations for enhancing relationships.

2. Current relationships between parents and the school

2.1 Parents' satisfaction with the school

One of the most positive findings from the survey was parents' overall satisfaction with the school. 86.21% of parents strongly agreed that they were very satisfied having their child at New Siblands School, that their child enjoys going to the school, and that they would recommend the school to other parents. This was echoed in the interviews, with parents keen to stress their overall positive experiences with the school, e.g. "it's a fantastic school and amazing people that work there and I wouldn't have him anywhere else" (Parent 3)ⁱⁱ.

"They have offered us so much support over the last year, we are really grateful. They are brilliant and we feel so lucky to have them"



ⁱⁱ Quotes from the interviews are labeled as Parent 1, 2 etc., All other quotes are from qualitative responses in the survey.

The survey asked parents to comment on three things they liked about the school and three things that could be improved. The most common words used to describe the school in the responses were “friendly”, “inclusive”, and “caring”.



Nineteen positive comments were about staff, and the interview participants also praised teachers e.g. “teachers are patient” (Parent 1), “nothing is too much trouble for them” (Parent 4). Eight positive comments focused on how the school met their child’s needs. Again, this was also noted in the interviews e.g. “(child) has come on leaps and bounds since he’s been at school” (Parent 4).

“Always looking out for the best interests of our child”

“Friendly, enthusiastic, and caring staff”

Nine parents noted the facilities as things that they liked about

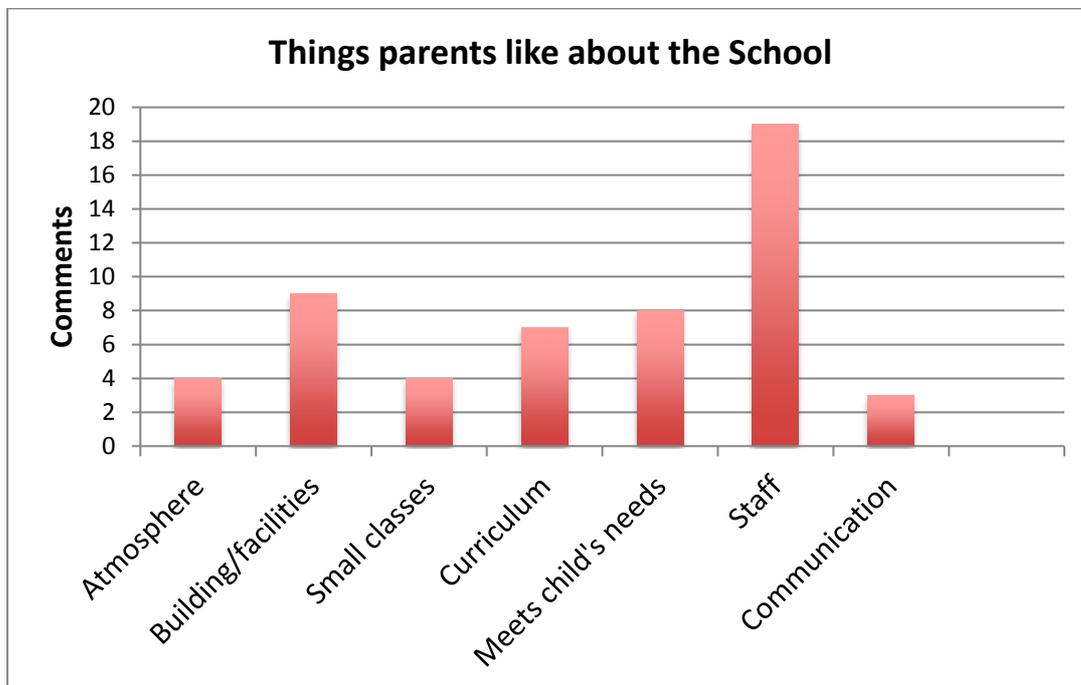
the school, including the swimming pool and sensory room, and also the school building(s) themselves: “Clean, tidy and welcoming building”. One comment noted that the school could do with being slightly bigger, and two mentioned it would be better for the Primary children to all be in one building, or always included in events and activities at the main Primary site.

Seven comments praised the curriculum and the opportunities for children to get involved in a range of activities, and to integrate with students in mainstream schools. This was also noted by parents in the interviews. Two parents requested after school clubs/activities, and this was again mentioned in the interviews.

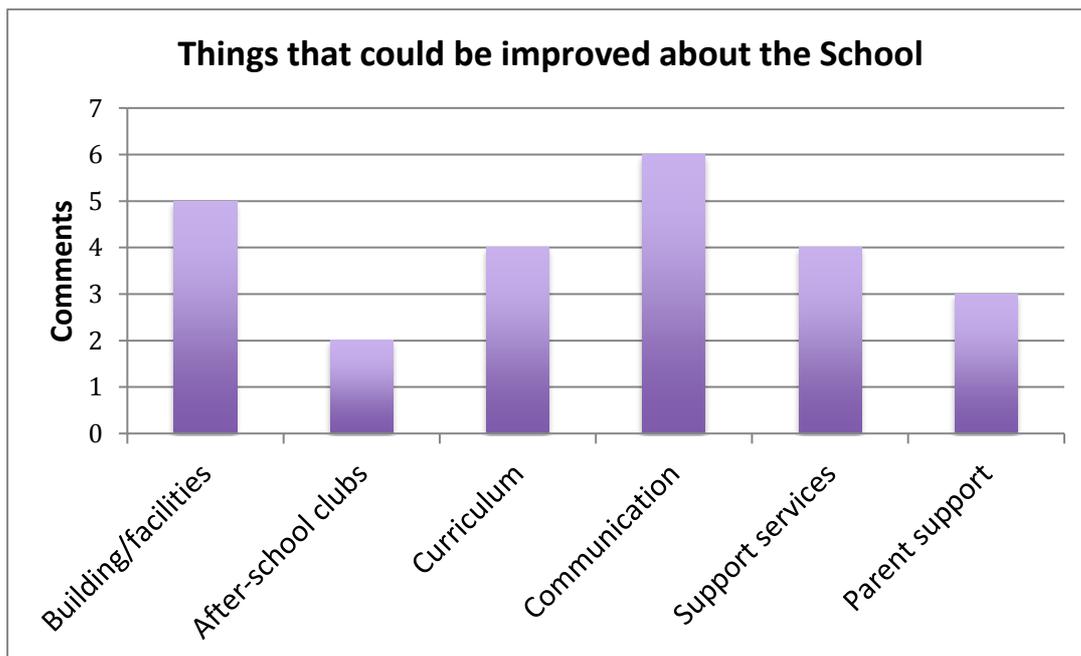
“Children are pushed to achieve”

“Bespoke activities during the day to engage, entertain and delight them”

Parents commented on the availability of speech and language therapy as an area for improvement (although this is not directly controlled by the school).



“All staff are extremely caring about their pupils and provide lots of support”

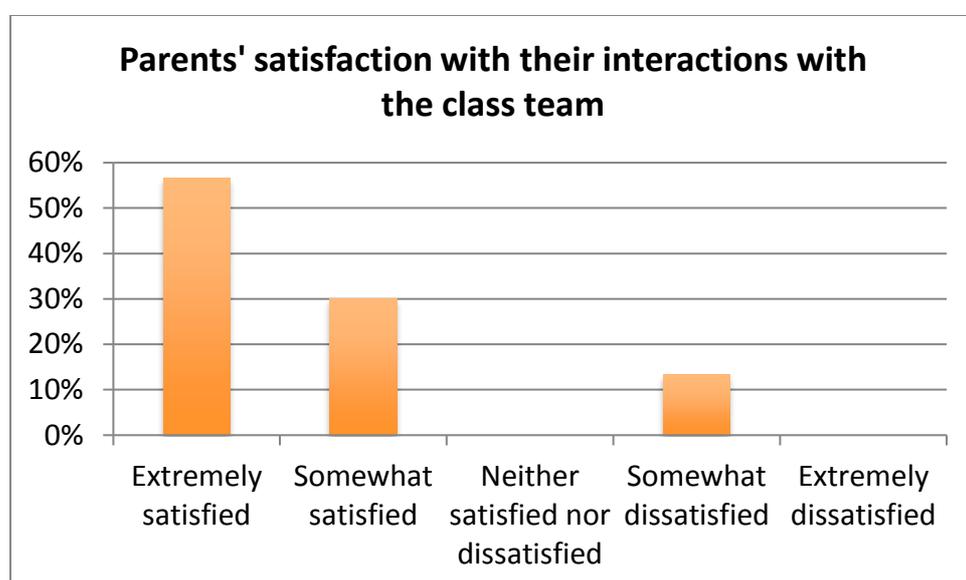


Key points

- Parents are very satisfied with the school overall.
- Teachers are highly appreciated by parents.
- Parents value the range of activities and inclusion opportunities offered by the school.

2.2 Parent-school communication

Parents' perceptions of communication with the school varied, with some viewing this as a strength of the school, and others seeing it as an area for improvement.



Parents believed that there were generally high levels of agreement between themselves and the class team – 17 parents agreed on just about every issue related to the child and 12 agreed more often than not on most issues. Nearly all parents thought that the class team were easy to reach when they had a problem or question (76.67% strongly agreed, 13.33% somewhat agreed) and that the class team kept them well-informed of their child's progress (66.67% strongly agreed, 23.33% somewhat agreed).

However, parents also commented that there could be greater understanding and empathy between themselves and teachers, and that teachers could listen more to parents. This was elaborated on in the interviews, with parents perceiving that teachers sometimes needed to pay more regard to what the child is like at home, even if their

behaviour is different at school e.g. “they could take on board more what the parents say” (Parent 3).

One of the key issues hindering parent-teacher communication is the lack of face to face contact, as there is no opportunity for contact at the school gate (as would be common in a mainstream school), and parents’ evenings were seen as being too rushed. There can sometimes be miscommunication through the daily diary, with parents occasionally perceiving that teachers haven’t read/responded to their comments e.g. “sometimes you put something in there that’s really important to you and then you’re a bit annoyed because there’s no comment about it when it comes home... I just assume that they’re too busy” (Parent 3).

There is potential to enhance the provision of information to parents, as only 53.33% of parents strongly agreed that they are provided with all the information they need related to school, and 36.67% somewhat agreed. Parents believed that they didn’t always receive letters from the school and that they were often lost from children’s bags on the way home. There was little engagement with the newsletter, as parents felt that the news was outdated by the time they received it and the quality of images was poor. Parents would like more information on the class timetable and topics being taught, and this was echoed in the interviews, with parents wishing to be given an overview of school activities at the start of the year, and to be sent reminders about events closer to the time.

Key points

- Parents generally feel well-informed about their child’s progress and that they can contact teachers when needed.
- Parents feel that teachers could be more understanding, empathetic, and willing to listen to parents.
- Parents would like better communication from the school about activities, events, and other general information.

2.3 Parents’ involvement at school and home

Parents engaged with the school in different ways. The large majority of parents had attended a parent-teacher evening (96.43%) or school event (89.29%). 57.14% had participated in fund-raising, and 50% had sent things to class or attended a workshop or meeting. Few parents had

attended a parent-teacher association meeting (21.43%) or volunteered at the school (7.14%). Interview participants felt that parents hadn't been encouraged or welcomed to get involved with the school in the past, and that many parents had now disengaged from the school, and so didn't attend events even when they were invited e.g. "they don't really want people to come in and help or anything like that... school aren't particularly inclusive or welcoming (to parents)...it's hard to suddenly as a parent to switch on your attendance" (Parent 2).

The majority of parents regularly supported their child's learning at home, and did the following more than once a week; sung/played songs or music with their child (85.71%), played games related to learning (74.29%), or read to their child (71.43%). Some parents were keen to have more opportunities to get involved with their child's learning at school, such as visiting or helping in the classroom e.g. "to be an extra pair of hands...(so) you get to see them change, you get to see them grow as individuals" (Parent 5). The school could also provide more guidance on how parents can support their child's progress at home, as only 43.33% strongly agreed that they received clear guidance and 33.33% somewhat agreed. This was also raised in the interviews, with parents wishing to know how they could continue at home what the child is doing at school.

"Show/model how to do this (supporting learning at home) rather than assume we know how. Guide us in what would be helpful to do. Remind us to do it. Ask how we are getting on"

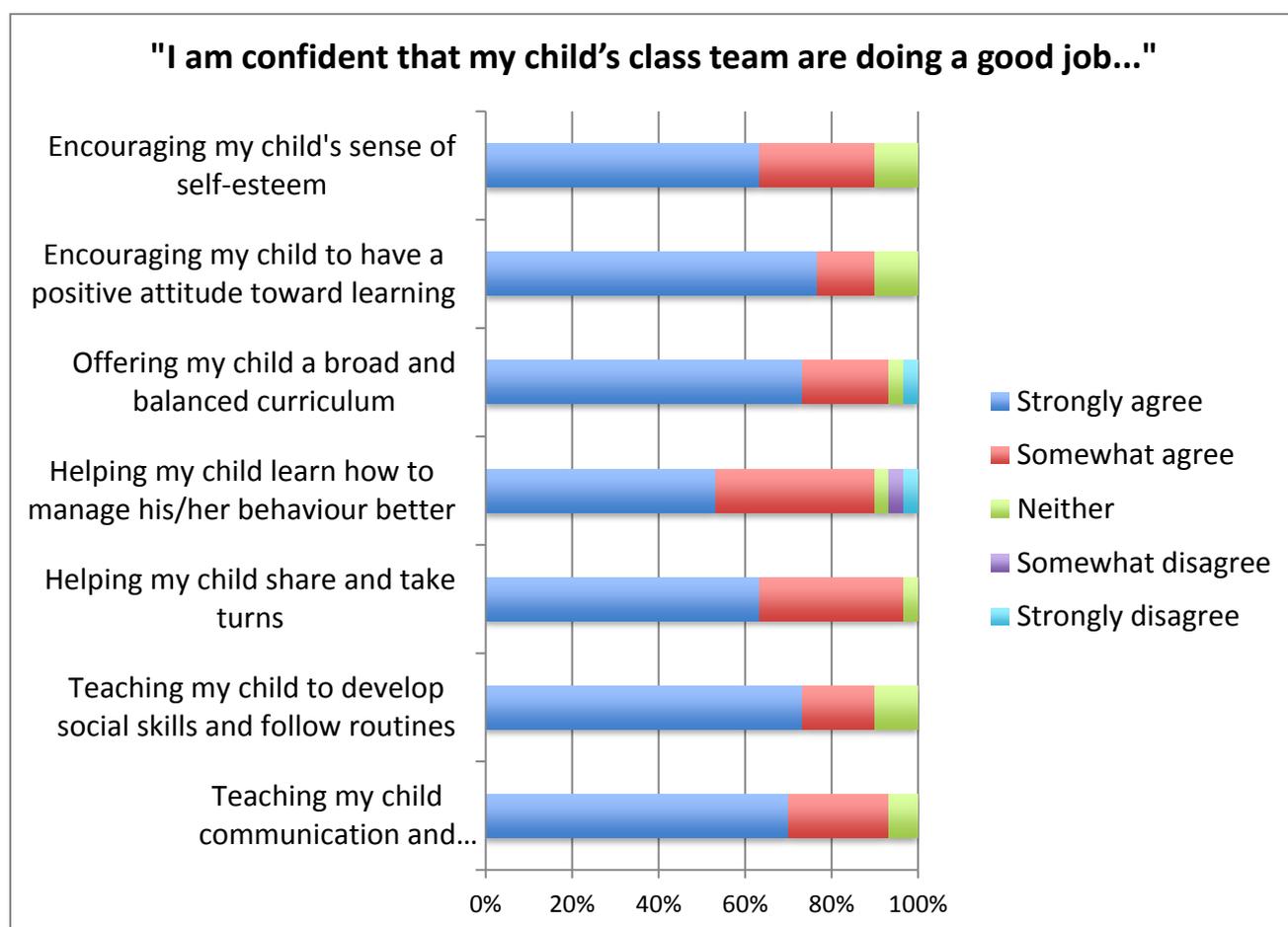
Key points

- Parents feel that they haven't been encouraged to get involved with the school in the past but would like more opportunities to do so.
- Parents are keen to support their child's learning at home, where appropriate, and would like more guidance from the school on how they can do this.

2.4 Trusting relationships between parents and the class team

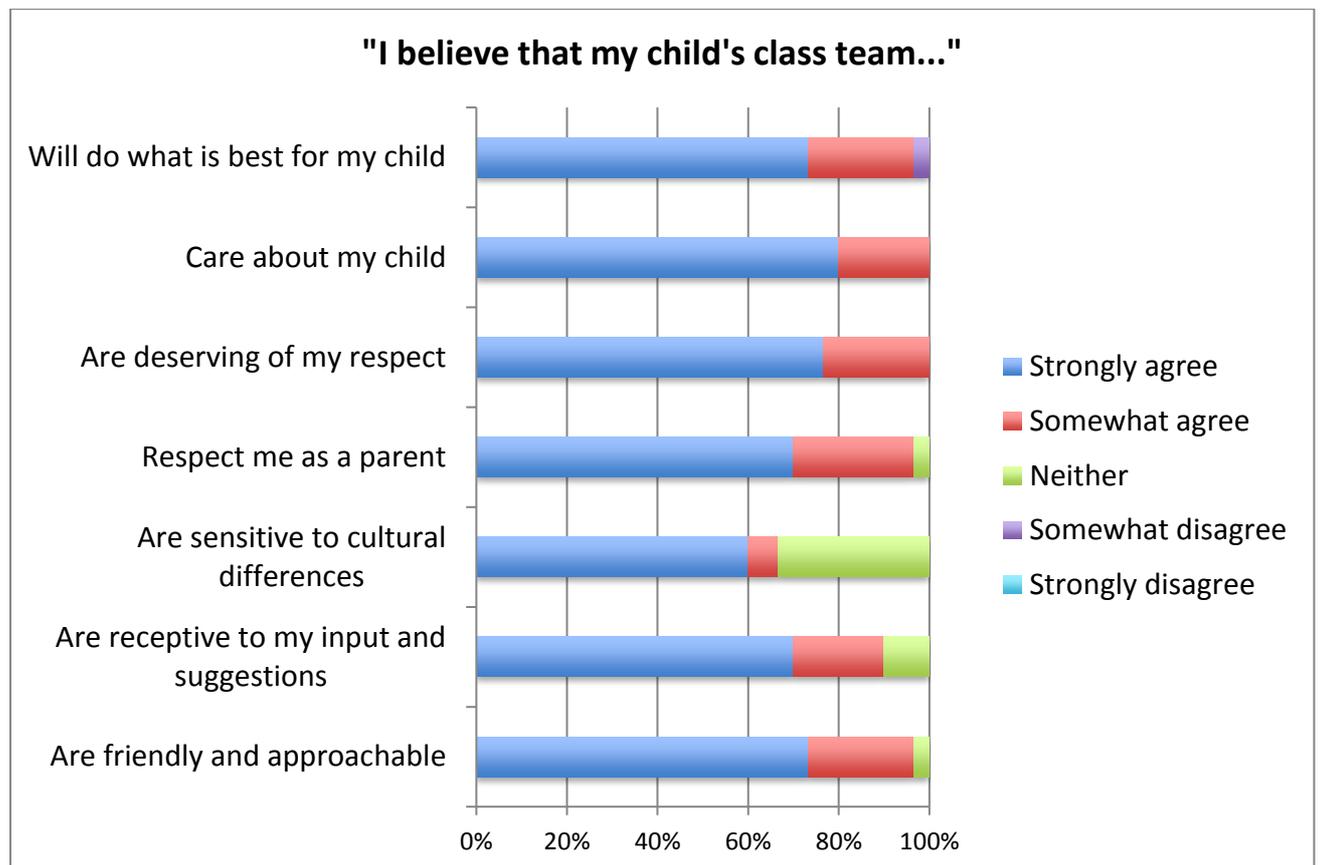
Parents were generally positive about the interpersonal relationships between themselves, the class team, and their child, and were confident in the class team’s ability to teach their child communication, independence, and social skills.

“We have a wonderful relationship with our child's teaching team at school. Our child's progress has been fantastic and he is clearly very happy at school”



Responses were slightly lower in regard to the class team’s ability to help their child manage his/her behaviour better (53.33% strongly agree and 36.67% somewhat agree), and one parent commented that they would like to see improved techniques for helping their child with behavioural issues. Interview participants noted infrequent occasions where parents felt their child’s needs hadn’t been dealt with appropriately, and that staff sometimes lacked awareness and knowledge of their child’s condition and how they should be supported.

This related to support staff, such as lunchtime and playground assistants, as well as classroom staff. A key issue raised in both the survey and interviews was that parents didn't always know who was part of their child's class team, aside from the teacher "it's quite disconcerting...I don't know what you do or who you are...you feel a bit removed" (Parent 5).



Key points

- Parents have trusting relationships with their child's teacher.
- However, parents don't always know who is part of their child's class team other than the teacher, or how other members of the class team are involved with their child.

Having presented the key findings from the research, the next section moves on to make suggestions for enhancing relationships.

3. Recommendations for enhancing relationships

Parents' suggestions for improvements were discussed with teachers in the focus group, and this section summarises the areas where enhancements could be most feasible and beneficial, and also potential issues in implementing some suggestions.

3.1 More comprehensive and tailored communication

Both parents and teachers were interested in greater use of email and text message communication. Providing a general daily timetable for all children in a class, supplemented by email communication which is specific to the individual child, could address parents' requests for more information on their child's activities in the classroom whilst also being efficient for teachers. Not all parents may be willing to use email though, as the school currently only holds valid email addresses for 68 out of 107 parents. Parents' communication preferences could be determined at the start of the school year, so that teachers can tailor communication with individual parents within practical limits (for example, offering a combination of daily checklists/written diaries/email, alongside less frequent telephone calls/face to face appointments). An overview of specific class timetables and topics, as well as wider school events, could be provided at the start of term, preferably in print and electronic formats, so parents have this information in advance. Text messages are then a quick and immediate way to send reminders to parents, for example about things the child needs to bring to school for particular events.

There is also some information that is crucial for parents to provide to teachers about what happens at home, specific to the individual child (for example, sleep/food/seizures/medication). Facilitating a way for parents to provide this information to teachers in a quick format (for example, a tick sheet) would help teachers in knowing what is going on outside the classroom (and some teachers already do this).

3.2 Contact with the whole class team

While parents generally had good relationships with teachers, they had little contact with the rest of the class team, yet both teachers and parents noted the importance of the whole class team in the child's experience at school. Parents should be kept up to date on the names and roles of all members of the class team, so they know who is involved

with their child at school. It would be valuable for parents to have more opportunities to meet and discuss their child with the teaching assistants and other support staff, as well as teachers, for example by extending parents evenings to include the whole class team.

3.3 More opportunities for parents to visit the school

Parents were keen to have more opportunities to visit the school and to discuss their child face to face with teachers and the class team. Inviting parents to the school for one-off events, such as Mother's Day/Father's Day/Easter, to class assemblies, or to see their child's work on display, could enable parents to become more involved with their child's learning at school. Teachers noted the potential for disruption to the child and the class when parents come into school, so this would need to be managed carefully. For example, activities should take place towards the end of the day so children go home afterwards, or the classroom could be opened up at the end of certain days for parents to visit. It is worth noting though that it could take time for parents to become more involved at the school, if they have not been used to coming into the school in the past.

3.4 Greater support for children's learning at home

Providing resources and activities for parents to use at home could be implemented at a more general level, as well as on an individual basis. The school website could provide guidance on how parents can support their child's learning at home, and ideas for how classroom topics can be repeated or extended (based on class timetables for the term). Individual communication from the class team to parents could find out what would help parents at home and suggest activities that are specific to their child's needs, with the recognition that at-home learning won't be appropriate for all children.

3.5 Support network for parents

The distance of many families from the school, and the lack of school gate interaction, means that parents have minimal contact with other parents. There is an opportunity for the Friends of New Siblands School (FONSS) to help create a more inclusive support network for parents alongside their fundraising role. Suggestions included online chat forums (which could be used for discussions and advice), regular coffee mornings, and social events for both parents and teachers. Holding events on different days and at a variety of times throughout the year

would make these more accessible for parents and teachers e.g. not all parents can make evening events, and teachers often have other commitments at weekends.

Key points

Relationships with parents could be enhanced by

- More comprehensive and tailored communication between the school and parents.
- Enabling contact between parents and the whole class team.
- More opportunities for parents to visit and become involved with the school.
- Providing greater support for children's learning at home.
- Creating a support network for parents.

4. Celebrating good practice

The school offers children a variety of opportunities and activities which support their learning and personal development. Some good practice that could be further developed and promoted include:

- inclusion opportunities with children from mainstream schools.

There are already successful collaborations with local schools, with activities such as Forest Schools, dance productions, and singing.

- organisations visiting the school (which is often more practical than school trips). Parents themselves belong to a wide range of organisations and have many different skills, and there is an opportunity here to encourage parents' involvement at the school by inviting them to contribute to school activities in a professional capacity.

- the use of Makaton. Teachers already use this as an important aspect of enhancing communication with pupils. However, it was raised that it could be used more widely across the school, including in classes where children are all verbal and in assemblies, to better enable communication between children who are verbal and non-verbal.

Children may not always tell their parents about what they do at school and teachers noted difficulties in promoting individual class activities, due to restrictions on using children's images. The recommendations in

this report would help in making parents aware of these activities, by providing more comprehensive information about what goes on in the classroom and through greater opportunities for interaction with the class team. Celebrating good practice across the school would be valuable in enhancing parents' perceptions of how the school meets their child's needs.

It is worthwhile to conclude this report by emphasising again the positive responses from parents regarding school staff. It is clear that staff are the key strength of the school, and that their caring, friendly attitude, and commitment to understanding and supporting the children is highly valued by parents.

Key points

- The range of activities and inclusion opportunities offered to children by the school are areas of good practice which should be developed and promoted.
- The attitude and commitment of staff are a key strength of the school and highly valued by parents.

“The headmaster should be very proud of his school and teachers”

The researcher would like to thank the staff and parents at New Siblands School for their time and cooperation in this study.

References

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² Barlow A, Humphrey N. 2012. A natural variation study of engagement and confidence among parents of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 27(4): 447-467.

³ Chen M, Anderson JAA, Watkins L. 2016. Parent Perceptions of Connectedness in a Full Service Community School Project. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 25(7): 2268–2278.

⁴ Syriopoulou-Dellia CK, Cassimosb DC, Polychronopoulouc SA. 2016. Collaboration between teachers and parents of children with ASD on issues of education. *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 55: 330-345.

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⁶ Mutch C, Collins S. 2012. Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement With Parents, Families, and Communities in New Zealand. *School Community Journal* 22(1): 167-187.

⁷ Chen M, Anderson JAA, Watkins L. 2016. Parent Perceptions of Connectedness in a Full Service Community School Project. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 25(7): 2268–2278.

Appendix 1 – Methodology

The research which this report was based upon was carried out in three stages:

1. Online survey to parents
2. Focus group with teachers
3. Telephone interviews with parents

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of the West of England ethics committee. The data collected was anonymised, treated as confidential, and securely stored. Data was only accessed by the researcher.

The survey collected quantitative and qualitative data. Questions were developed based on academic literature and through collaboration with the Headteacher of New Siblands School. The survey was pilot tested with teachers and a parent at the school, and minor amends made before it was launched. The survey link was sent out via email to 68 parents who had provided the school with a valid email address (out of 107 parents, 30 parents hadn't provided an email address and another nine email addresses were found to be invalid). Parents were sent a text message to alert them that the email had been sent. A reminder email and text message was sent after two weeks and the survey was open for three weeks in total. Participants in the survey were eligible to be entered into a prize draw to win a gift voucher for £25, as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Thirty responses were received, a response rate of 44.1%. Most respondents were female (82.14%) and White British (85.71%). The age of respondents varied from 25 to 65 or older, although with 92.86% aged 25-54. The majority were married/in a domestic partnership (78.57%), with 17.85% divorced/separated and 3.57% never married. Household incomes ranged from under £15000 to £100000+, with the median range £40000 - £54999. Occupations were predominantly split between employed full-time (17.86%), employed part-time (32.14%), homemaker (25%), and unable to work (10.71%). Education levels ranged from secondary school to doctorate, with most either secondary school or college/apprenticeship (32.14% each).

All teachers at New Siblands School were invited via email to take part in an after school focus group (n = 16) and 3 teachers participated. Eleven parents provided their details in the survey to be contacted for a follow-up interview. All 11 parents were sent an email inviting them to participate in a telephone interview at a time of their convenience, and this was followed up with a telephone call a week later. Five parents subsequently took part in an interview. Interviews lasted between 15 and 80 minutes. Participants in the interviews and focus groups were provided with an information sheet about the study and a guide to the questions beforehand, and were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study before agreeing to participate. Participants in the interviews and focus groups were free to withdraw from the study at any point, and to have their data removed from the study.