

Education-a working relationship between Teachers Parents and the Child

This booklet was originally written in 1989 with the introduction of **mainstreaming** to New Zealand and its likely effect on parents and teachers of children with disabilities as a guide to parents and to teachers. I have rewritten the booklet in the light of the needs of parents of and children with Williams Syndrome. This is the result of my attendance at the Williams Syndrome Camp held in Nelson in 2013.

The booklet is dedicated to Finn my grandson with Williams Syndrome .
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The booklet is based upon research undertaken by the author in 1989; a pilot study of the parent/teacher professional partnership. The research was conducted in a medium sized low decile primary school with the parents of 25 special needs children. The study researched the group of parents and investigated the quality of their interactions with teachers and other professionals in the light of the parents expectations and asked them how they would like such professionals to work in conjunction with them in the best interests of their child.

In the authors study it was clear that parents want professionals/teachers to be open and honest about the expectations of and the boundaries for their partnership at whatever level. Parents wanted clear indicators of what was and what was not on offer within the partnership from the professionals point of view. They also wanted to feel valued in their contribution within the partnership.

The aim of this revised booklet is to resource parents of children with Williams Syndrome in their interactions with teachers and other educational professionals who are working with their children.

I think I have amended the original booklet appropriately and value your feedback.

Teachers and professionals need to develop confidence in the judgement of, and the power of, parents as equals to achieve balance in negotiating agreed understandings that bring about the best possible education for their child with Williams Syndrome.

Principle: Teachers who include parents in their management schema potentially offer all children in their class the opportunity to benefit educationally.

Some benefits of involvement of parents are:

- * involvement is a proactive way of sharing child assessment and evaluation.
- * involvement fosters broad based assessment resulting in accurate assessment and focussed planning for learning.
- * recognition of the aims and aspirations of family for the child.
- * ability of the parent to make informed comment and take an active part in the child's planning for learning and facilitation of that learning.
- * improved parent and teacher knowledge of the child through collective participation.
- * parents support of teachers in their programming of focussed classroom experiences for the child.
- * enhanced parent understanding of the child's classroom experiences leading to enhanced learning.

Teachers Should:

- * make time to listen to parents and hear what they have to say about their child.
- * be up front and honest with parents giving them clear, precise, accurate and

understandable information about their child.

- * value parents input. As a parent you have grown up with your child and know him/her better than anyone. You are the expert on your child and the teacher should value your input.
- * encourage you to be positive and proactive about their learning programme for your child.
- * keep you informed about what is happening for your child in the classroom and the wider school.
- * value you for what you are not what they might expect you to be. You are only human.
- * maintain pathways for two way communication; email, text, phone, personal visits, notes home, websites, etc. Teachers should know your preferred means of communicating.
- * inform you when material is sent home and explain how best to make use of that material with your child.
- * share with you the joys and the sorrows of your child's learning journey. We should share problems and not play any blame games.
- * tell parents what they can and cannot do in facilitating learning for your child.
- * make sure they carry out the actions they say they will, and, if they cannot then let the parent know.
- * value your difference and that of your child and be prepared to talk about them with you and your child.
- * value and cherish their partnership with you.
- * above all be a friend and a colleague of yours.

Remember to remind the teacher that for you, as a parent, your child must come first. Let teachers know that you understand and respect their role in the learning programme of many children but for you your focus is your child and his/her learning progress.

“Educators must understand the needs, and expectations of students, and parents, if they are to develop appropriate school programmes to meet those needs.” Cattermole and Robinson 1985

It is important for teachers to recognise that:

- * as a parent you know your child better than anyone.
- * as a parent you have the right to make and trust your judgements about yourself and your child as well as that of the teacher.
- * nobody knows what a child is capable of achieving. Goals need to be set high yet achievable.
- * as a parent you have the right to seek other opinions; become well informed; and share them with the teacher.
- * you have the right to ask for information on your child and to seek further clarification.
- * parents are real people with emotions and feelings similar to you own.
- * a partnership based on equality with the parent is a really important factor in a child's learning journey.
- * as a parent you have the absolute right to be involved in your child's learning journey.

Remember: Teachers have the above rights also so please respect them.

Principle: True partnership comes when all parties are honest with, respect and trust each other.

You can enhance the parent/teacher relationship:

- * by maintaining great home/school communication which meets the needs of both parties.
- * when as a parent you can choose and communicate the extent of your involvement.
- * when as a parent you are encouraged to help in making decisions about your child's learning.
- * when you encourage the teacher to listen to and value what you have to say.
- * when both parties share their skills and expertise in relation to your child.
- * by sharing information on your child openly so that informed decisions are made.
- * by finding mutually agreeable times to meet.
- * by meetings in situations where all feel comfortable.
- * by maintaining positive attitudes about the child at all times.
- * when both parties acknowledge the value of the others contribution to the child's learning.
- * by ensuring that there are agreed understandings of the child's learning journey. When there is any misunderstanding explanations are clear, simple and jargon free.
- * when both parties seek advice on the child's learning when this seems appropriate.
- * when both parties know they have a relationship where they consider themselves friends.

Remember: Within a friendship we feel more comfortable when we can talk with an openness which reflects a true sharing of responsibility and there are no feelings of power.

What can Teachers reasonably expect of Parents:

- * they can expect us to put the learning interests of our child first.
- * they can expect us to appreciate the efforts that they make on behalf of our child.
- * they can expect honesty within the bounds of trust and confidentiality.
- * they can expect us to give help at school within the constraints of available time and family organisation. However:
 - we need our contribution to be negotiated.
 - we need our involvement to be organised.
 - we need our contribution to be acknowledged and appreciated.
 - we need to see positive results of our involvement.
 - we need to know what is expected of us.
- * they can expect us to accept and help with homework. However we do expect negotiation over this. Maybe our child should also be involved in this negotiation.
- * they can expect us to maintain appropriate privacy and confidentiality.
- * above all they can expect us to take part in all consultation involving our child's learning journey in the spirit of true partnership.

What do Parents Expect of Teachers:

- * we expect teachers to plan and implement a learning programme for our child which will help our child academically, socially and culturally.
- * we expect teachers to know our child extremely well.
- * we expect teachers to consult with us valuing our knowledge of our child.
- * we expect teachers to involve us in matters regarding our child's learning journey.
- * we expect teachers to respect our right to question and clarify matters regarding our child's learning.
- * we expect teachers to accept our right to seek a second opinion if we feel we need one. We will communicate that opinion as appropriate.
- * we expect teachers to support us as we support them even when we do not agree.
- * we expect teachers to value our difference and that of our child.

* we expect teachers to plan and implement a learning journey that is designed for our child's special needs when that is appropriate.

Remember: Teachers are busy people and timing can be an issue for them. Be realistic in your expectations. Always be prepared to offer help in implementing your child's programme.

What forms of Communication are most Valued by Parents within the Partnership:

General:

* newsletters are best when teachers want to inform a lot of parents. These may be electronic or paper based remembering that not all parents have electronic devices. Make them interesting, informative and simple to understand. Leave some copies in the foyer or online for other interested parties e.g. grandparents.

* we appreciate meetings which are small, focussed and personal.

"in the study parents expressed their annoyance at larger meeting especially those in which professionals dominated proceedings."

* teachers and schools need to consider the time and place of meetings. The convenience to parents must be considered.

* news media: perhaps schools should consider a column in the local community newspaper.

"If we do not value the worth of our client group, the parents, and respond to them they give up attempting to access us and develop a sense of mistrust of the teacher as a professional." Kramer 1985

Personal:

* parents value direct personal communication.

* we value the time and effort that teachers put into personal communication and consultation with us concerning our child.

* we appreciate teachers honesty.

* we appreciate specific information on our child.

* we appreciate reports which are specific, and are explained in simple language.

* we expect teachers to plan for our child's learning based upon any deficits they have reported.

* we appreciate the opportunity to follow up on reports at a later date.

* we appreciate verbal communication but would like to either; be handed notes on the discussion or be permitted to take notes during discussion which we can share with the teacher and child.

* we appreciate teachers who negotiate the preferred form of communication with us.

Personal, telephone, email, text or written contact. Notes home are fine provided we can be sure that we receive them. Children can be forgetful and sometimes devious.

"Adequate information about the school should be communicated to parents so that they gain a full understanding of its aims and philosophies, as well as its organisational structure;" and further; "more detailed information concerning the activities in which children are engaged may serve to stimulate the interest and support of parents." Harris 1980

So's for Teachers in working with Parents:

* do immediately let us know your concerns about our child's learning journey.

- * do let us know if you are struggling to cope with our child in any way. We will willingly give help and advice. However we too may be struggling. Shared difficulties are easier to cope with.
- * do be friendly and keep communication lines open.
- * do keep trying to contact us even when we do not respond. If possible leave us a message.
- * do keep our privacy safe. We trust you with our sensitive information. Please ask us if you want to share our information with others.
- * do respect our right to silence over information we would rather not share.
- * do respect our decision when we do not act on your suggestion. What we decide to do is our decision and our responsibility. We will inform you of what we are doing.
- * do inform us when we or our child do not fulfill our obligations to you.
- * do let us bring up our child in the way we feel is appropriate unless we ask for your help.
- * do expect us to do the best for our child. Remember we are not super-human.

Practical Parent Involvement:

In parent/teacher partnership working together is a natural everyday process based upon normal adult to adult relationships.

Practically the school/teacher can:

- * be open allowing parents to “pop in and see what is happening.”
- * promote a two way equal sharing of information through verbal, telephone, email, text, note, WWW, and newsletter.
- * involve the parent in helping in collaboratively planned, managed ways where both know precisely what the each are doing and why.
- * schedule regular personal contacts with parents by phone, email, text, personal home visits, or by inviting parents to the school for discussion possibly over coffee.
- * meet and talk with parents informally when they come into the school/classroom, at the supermarket, in the street, at the beach etc.

Remember: Read the body language. Be aware and recognise whether they have the time to talk.

The Benefits of Partnership:

Everyone gets to know each better.

The child benefits.

Everyone feels valued through acceptance of the contribution that each makes with and for the other. The child benefits.

Everyone gains knowledge and understanding of the child’s learning journey. The child benefits greatly.

The child feels really good because those close to him/her are showing genuine interest in each other and in his/her learning journey.

This 'focussed friendship' leads to 'agreed understandings' between teachers/professionals and parents based upon equal sharing of educational responsibility. The consequence of this is more effective management of the curriculum in the best interest of the child.

If partnership is to become workable it must be set firmly within specific contexts and cultures, and consideration must be given to its objectives, its implementation, its control and above all its impact on the partners and to those to whom the partners are responsible; the children.

Within the parent/teacher partnership parents should have shared responsibility for selecting goals and objectives through informed decision making, whilst the teacher should have the responsibility for selecting the methodology and the technology to make this happen.

To achieve this there needs to be a willingness and a concerted effort from both parties to work effectively in establishing the 'focussed friendship' and 'agreed understandings' that the author alludes to.

It is obvious from both the extensive research in this field and the findings of this pilot study that the advantages the partnership between parents and teachers brings for the child, the parents and the teacher who facilitate the child's learning journey far outweigh the disadvantages we may perceive. Schools, teachers and professional who work with Williams Syndrome children should vigorously pursue managed, collaborative parental and caregiver involvement in educational settings from a position of equality in partnership with each other.

Can partnership then become a reality? Not it would seem until both parents and teachers abandon old habits of thinking about one another and establish, in the context of initial assessment and continued association, that 'focussed friendship' based on promoting the educational achievement and social development of the Williams Syndrome child with which partnership begins. Without this the 'agreed understanding' the author alludes to is unattainable.

Remember: Your child's teacher is human and like you wants the best for your child. However they are constrained by curriculum and school requirements so focussed friendship may take time. Be patient. be friendly, keep communication open and above all remain focussed on your child's learning journey. Aim for the best and do not accept anything less for your child.

Children can and do achieve more than parents and teachers often expect. We always should expect the best. Enjoy your child and your own learning journey.

All the very best,
Leon Wickham
Grandad of Finn

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