



SERVICES FOR SCHOOLS

Hampshire guidance for effective partnership with parents and carers

Improving outcomes through relational
practice, inclusion and belonging

September 2026

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Foreword

Every child and young person should feel safe, valued, and able to succeed within their educational community.

Achieving this requires strong, relational partnership between schools, families, and communities. When adults work together with trust, shared ambition and clear communication, children and young people are more likely to attend, participate and engage, and experience a genuine sense of belonging.

Across Hampshire, schools are reporting to be responding to increasing complexity in need, including SEND, attendance, emotional wellbeing, and safeguarding. This context reinforces the importance of working proactively and collaboratively with parents and carers, recognising them as essential partners in supporting children's development and success.

This guidance promotes a culture where:

- relationships are prioritised and built on trust
- families are listened to and actively involved
- communication is open, respectful, and solution-focused
- differences are recognised, valued, and supported
- all children and young people feel they belong and matter to the community of which they are a part.

By strengthening these partnerships, we create inclusive communities where every child and young person can thrive and achieve their potential.

Executive summary

Purpose of this guidance

This guidance provides Hampshire schools with a shared evidence-informed framework to develop and sustain effective partnerships with parents and carers. It has been developed to support schools in strengthening relationships with families, to improve outcomes for children and young people and to promote a culture of inclusion and belonging.

Strategic aims

- Improve educational outcomes.
- Strengthen attendance, participation and engagement.
- Promote inclusion and belonging.
- Strengthen outcomes for all, regardless of pupils' starting points
- Reduce conflict and complaints.
- Strengthen safeguarding partnerships.
- Develop workforce confidence and capability.
- Improve experiences of learners who are vulnerable at any time.
- Recognise that Parents/Carers are key stakeholders in their child's outcomes.

Evidence base

This guidance draws on a range of national and international research, statutory frameworks, and policy documents which collectively emphasise the importance of strong parental partnerships, inclusive communication, safeguarding, attendance, and pupil outcomes.

The **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)** highlights the significant impact of parental engagement on pupil attainment, noting that effective schools prioritise high-quality communication and tailored support for families (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). Similarly, the **OECD PISA studies (2018; 2022)** demonstrate that parental involvement is positively correlated with improved academic outcomes, wellbeing, and school engagement across international contexts (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2023).

The **Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (2025)** and accompanying **toolkits** reinforce the expectation that schools foster meaningful relationships with parents and carers, ensuring transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness in communication. These frameworks emphasise the importance of attendance, safeguarding, and parental engagement as key indicators of school effectiveness (Ofsted, 2025a; Ofsted, 2025b).

This is supported by findings from **Parentkind National Parent Surveys**, which consistently show that parents value clear, timely and respectful communication, particularly in relation to attendance, progress, and wellbeing (Parentkind, 2023).

Statutory safeguarding guidance, including **Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026)** and **Keeping Children Safe in Education (2025)**, emphasises the necessity of collaborative working between schools and families to promote child welfare and early intervention (HM Government, 2026a; Department for Education, 2025). These frameworks underline that effective communication with parents is essential for safeguarding practice.

Inclusion is further supported by the **SEND Code of Practice (2015)** and subsequent policy developments such as *Every Child Achieving and Thriving (2026)*, which stress the importance of co-production with parents and carers, ensuring their voices are central to decision-making (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015; HM Government, 2026b).

Attendance guidance, including **Working Together to Improve School Attendance (2024)** and **A Guide for Schools on Communicating with Parents about Attendance (DfE, 2024)**, highlights the importance of building trusting, respectful relationships with families. These documents emphasise the use of clear, consistent, and empathetic communication to improve attendance outcomes and reduce absence (Department for Education, 2024a; Department for Education, 2024b).

Aligned with these principles, the **Hampshire Vision** articulates a clear expectation that every parent and carer should experience a respectful, inclusive, and effective partnership throughout their child's educational journey. This reflects a shared national priority to ensure all families feel supported, informed, and empowered.

Taken together, this evidence base supports the development of a structured approach to communicating with parents about attendance, grounded in respect, clarity, and partnership working.

The Hampshire Parent Partnership Framework

Built on five interconnected pillars aligned to Hampshire's approach to inclusion, this framework provides a shared model through which schools can develop, evaluate, and strengthen their work with parents and carers.

Pillar 1

Relational and strengths-based

Building trusting partnerships with parents and carers.

Parents are welcome, listened to and treated as valued partners.

Strengths of the child and family are recognised and built upon.

Pillar 2

Skilled and confident practice

Developing staff expertise in working with families.

Staff are trained in relational approaches and de-escalation.

Consistent language and approaches used across the setting.

Pillar 3

Consistent and equitable practice

Clear, reliable and inclusive approaches for all families,

Communication systems are accessible and consistently applied.

Adjustments ensure inclusion and regardless of background.

Pillar 4

Proactive and preventative

Working together early to prevent concerns escalating.

Early conversations take place when concerns first arise.

A graduated, solution-focused approach is used.

Pillar 5

Collaborative and community-focused

Valuing parent voice and strengthening community connections.

Feedback informs improvement and is visibly acted upon.

A shared culture of belonging is promoted.

Pillar 1: Relational and strength-based

Relationships (relational practice and trust)

Why it matters

Strong, trusting relationships between schools and families are the foundation of effective parent partnerships. When parents and carers feel respected, listened to, and understood, they are more likely to engage positively with schools, share concerns early and work collaboratively to support their child.

Research consistently highlights the central role of relationships in improving outcomes. The EEF emphasises that schools should build relationships with parents before difficulties arise, rather than relying on reactive communication when concerns escalate. Similarly, Parent kind national surveys indicate that many parents feel they are only contacted when something has gone wrong, which can undermine trust and create anxiety.

The Ofsted Education Inspection Framework reinforces that building and maintaining positive relationships with parents is a core leadership responsibility. Effective schools ensure that communication is transparent, inclusive, and responsive, and that all parents feel able to contribute to their child's education.

For learners who are vulnerable, including those with SEND, attendance difficulties or safeguarding needs, relational practice is particularly critical. Trusting relationships enable earlier identification of need, support co-production and reduce the likelihood of conflict, minimising barriers to engagement.

At a system level, effective relationships contribute directly to improved:

- attendance and engagement
- safeguarding outcomes
- inclusion and early intervention
- parental confidence and collaboration.

Parent partnership, therefore, should be understood not as an additional activity, but as a core school improvement strategy grounded in relational practice.

What this looks like in practice

Relational practice is reflected in the quality, consistency, and intent of everyday interactions between schools and families. It is proactive, inclusive, and rooted in respect.

Schools must focus on building relationships before difficulties arise.

Schools prioritise positive, regular communication that is not solely when difficulties arise. This includes:

- early contact with families at key transition points
- sharing strengths, successes, and progress
- creating opportunities for connection.

This approach establishes trust and ensures that when challenges do emerge, conversations are more constructive and collaborative.

Neurodiversity-affirming practice

Schools recognise and value the expertise that parents hold about their children, particularly if a child or young person is neurodivergent.

Effective practice includes:

- using language that affirms difference
- recognising that children may present differently at home and at school
- collaborating with families to understand individual needs
- avoiding deficit-based narratives in meetings and written communication
- recognising that some parents may themselves be neurodivergent and adjust communication accordingly to ensure accessibility and understanding.

Elective home education (EHE) prevention through relationship-building

Where relationships break down, families may experience barriers to engaging with school, sometimes leading to elective home education as a last resort.

Relational practice supports early intervention by:

- identifying signs of pupils experiencing barriers to engagement, e.g. repeated absence, reduced timetables
- offering genuine opportunities for problem-solving
- exploring underlying concerns such as unmet SEND need, bullying, or anxiety
- maintaining an open, non-judgemental dialogue.

A strong relationship ensures that families feel able to raise concerns and seek support before reaching crisis points.

Tone, language, and assumptions in communication

Every interaction contributes to (or undermines) trust. Schools adopt a strengths-based approach that:

- assumes positive intent
- avoids blame or deficit-based language
- uses warm, respectful, and solution-focused communication
- recognises the emotional impact of school contact.

This is particularly important in situations involving attendance, behaviour, or safeguarding, where communication can easily feel adversarial if not managed carefully.

Consistency and reliability

Trust develops over time through consistent experience.

Schools ensure that:

- parents know who to contact
- communication is timely and responsive
- messages are clear and aligned across staff
- consistency reduces confusion and builds confidence in the school's approach.

Key expectations for schools

Schools are expected to:

- prioritise relationship-building as a core strategy, not a reactive response
- establish positive contact with families early, before concerns arise
- ensure every communication includes a named and accessible contact
- adopt a strengths-based, non-judgemental approach in all interactions
- recognise and value parental expertise, particularly for children with additional needs
- create opportunities for meaningful dialogue, not one-way communication
- respond to concerns with openness and professional curiosity, rather than defensiveness
- maintain consistency and reliability in communication and relationships.

Hampshire approach

Schools adopting this framework place relational practice at the centre of their work with families.

They recognise that:

Strong relationships are the foundation upon which all other aspects of effective parent partnership are built. By investing in trust, respect and collaboration, schools create the conditions for improved attendance, inclusion, safeguarding and long-term outcomes for children and young people.

Pillar 2: Skilled and confident

Supporting learning and engagement

Why it matters

Parents and carers play a crucial role in supporting children's learning, development, and engagement with school. When families understand how to support learning, feel confident in their role and are supported by schools to engage positively, children are more likely to achieve, attend regularly and experience success.

The EEF identifies parental engagement as one of the most effective and cost-efficient approaches to improving pupil outcomes. Effective practice goes beyond simply informing parents, focusing instead on equipping them with practical strategies to support learning at home and fostering meaningful dialogue between school and family.

Research also highlights that engagement is not solely about academic support. A child's readiness to learn is linked to wider factors, including emotional wellbeing, confidence, and relationships. Where parents feel supported, listened to, and included, they are better able to support their child's learning and engagement.

Transitions are particularly significant moments in a child's educational journey. These points can either strengthen or weaken parent-school relationships. When managed effectively, they provide an opportunity to build trust, share information, and establish positive patterns of engagement from the outset.

Parental wellbeing is also a key factor. For some families, interactions with school can be a source of anxiety or stress. If communication is unclear, overwhelming, or perceived as judgemental, this can create barriers to engagement. Conversely, when schools adopt a compassionate and supportive approach, parents are more likely to engage constructively.

Strengthening parental engagement contributes directly to:

- improved attainment and progress
- increased attendance and participation
- greater confidence in supporting learning at home
- improved wellbeing for both children and families
- stronger and more sustained home-school relationships.

Supporting learning and engagement is therefore a shared responsibility, requiring schools to actively enable and sustain meaningful parental involvement.

What this looks like in practice

Effective support for learning and engagement is proactive, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of families.

Supporting learning at home

Schools provide parents with clear, practical guidance on how to support their child's learning. This includes:

- sharing strategies that are realistic and accessible.
- focusing on high-impact activities (e.g. reading, routines, discussion)
- avoiding overwhelming or overly technical information
- tailoring support for different ages and needs.

Communication is designed to build confidence, ensuring parents feel confident and valued in their role, rather than judged or uncertain.

Transitions as relationship-building opportunities

Transitions are approached as key moments for establishing, supporting engagement and building trust.

Effective practice includes:

- initiating contact with families before transition points
- gathering information about the child's strengths, needs, and interests
- providing clear and accessible information about school routines and expectations
- recognising that some parents may bring prior negative experiences of education.
- following up after transition to ensure families feel settled and supported.

By investing in transitions, schools set the foundation for ongoing engagement and partnership.

Recognising and supporting parental wellbeing

Schools understand that parental wellbeing directly influences children's engagement and outcomes.

In practice, this includes:

- considering the emotional impact of communication, meetings, and processes
- avoiding language or systems that may cause anxiety or stigma
- creating a welcoming and supportive environment for dialogue
- training staff to recognise signs of parental distress
- signposting to appropriate support services where needed
- schools recognise that while they are not mental health providers, their approach can either reduce or exacerbate stress for families.

Reducing barriers to engagement

Barriers to engagement and participation are affected by a range of factors including time, confidence, prior experiences, and competing pressures.

Schools respond by:

- offering flexible approaches to communication and meetings
- ensuring information is clear, concise, and accessible.
- avoiding assumptions about family capacity or circumstances
- providing multiple opportunities for involvement
- recognising and valuing different forms of engagement.

This ensures that all families experiencing barriers to engagement, including those who may be less visible, are supported to participate.

Creating consistent and meaningful communication about learning

Communication about learning is ongoing and purposeful, rather than limited to formal reporting points.

This includes:

- regular updates on progress and next steps
- clear explanations of how parents can support specific areas of learning
- opportunities for two-way dialogue about progress and development
- ensuring that communication is supportive, not solely focused on gaps or concerns.

This creates a shared understanding between school and home, strengthening the child's learning experience.

Key expectations for schools

Schools are expected to:

- actively support parents to participate and engage in their child's learning, providing clear and practical guidance
- view pupil engagement as a shared responsibility, requiring initiative-taking school leadership
- use transitions as opportunities to build relationships and establish positive engagement early
- ensure communication about learning is regular, clear, and accessible, not limited to formal reporting
- recognise and respond to barriers to engagement, including time, confidence, and wellbeing
- adopt a compassionate and supportive approach to all interactions with parents
- promote confidence in parents, valuing their role in supporting learning and development
- provide flexible and inclusive opportunities for engagement, ensuring all families can participate.

Hampshire approach

Schools adopting this framework recognise that supporting learning and engagement is not simply about providing information, but about enabling meaningful partnership.

They understand that:

When parents feel confident, informed, and supported, they are better able to participate and engage in their child's education, leading to improved outcomes, stronger relationships, and sustained success.

Through clear communication, supportive practice and a commitment to inclusion, schools create the conditions in which both children and families can thrive.

Pillar 3: Consistent and equitable

Inclusion, equity, and voice

Why it matters

Inclusive and equitable parent partnership ensures that all families, regardless of background, experience, or circumstance, can engage meaningfully with their child's education. Schools serve increasingly diverse communities, and effective partnership requires an intentional focus on removing barriers, promoting equity, and amplifying parent voice.

Statutory and national guidance, including the SEND Code of Practice, emphasises the importance of co-production with parents and carers, recognising them as partners in decision-making. Parents bring essential knowledge of their child's strengths, needs and experiences, and their voice is critical in shaping effective support.

Research and national surveys, including Parentkind, consistently highlight that parents want to be listened to, involved earlier and included in decisions that affect their child. However, barriers such as language, digital access, socio-economic factors, and previous negative experiences of education can affect participation and engagement if not actively addressed.

Inclusive partnership also requires recognition of systemic inequalities. The rising cost of living, differing levels of digital access and varying levels of confidence or familiarity with school systems can all influence how and whether families engage. Without deliberate action, some families remain less visible and less able to access support.

Effective inclusive practice supports:

- improved identification of need, particularly for SEND pupils
- stronger co-production with families
- greater parental confidence and trust
- more equitable access to opportunities and support
- improved outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

Inclusion, equity, and voice are therefore fundamental to effective parent partnership, ensuring that all families are not only welcomed, but actively enabled to participate fully in their child's education.

What this looks like in practice

Inclusive partnership is proactive, responsive, and designed to ensure that all parents and carers can participate and engage in ways that are accessible and meaningful.

Ensuring accessible and inclusive communication

Schools adopt communication approaches that are clear, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all families.

This includes:

- providing information in multiple formats where needed
- considering literacy levels and avoiding overly complex language
- ensuring communication systems reach all families effectively
- being mindful of digital exclusion and offering alternatives where required
- establishing clear expectations around communication platforms and response times.

Communication is carefully matched to purpose and sensitivity, recognising that different channels are appropriate for different types of messages.

Supporting families with English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Schools ensure that families with EAL can participate and engage fully and understand key information.

Effective practice includes:

- providing translated materials or access to interpretation where appropriate
- checking understanding rather than assuming comprehension
- ensuring that EAL families are included in all aspects of school life
- recognising cultural differences and valuing diverse perspectives.

This supports equitable access to information, participation, and decision-making.

Addressing financial barriers and promoting equity

Schools recognise the impact of the rising cost of living on families' ability to engage.

Inclusive practice includes:

- reviewing the hidden costs of the school day (uniform, trips, resources)
- ensuring no child is excluded from opportunities due to inability to pay
- communicating sensitively about costs and available support
- providing discreet access to financial assistance
- avoiding assumptions about family circumstances

By taking an economic disadvantage-aware approach, schools ensure that all families can participate fully.

Embedding parent voice and co-production

Parents and carers are actively involved in shaping decisions that affect their child and, where appropriate, the wider school community.

This includes:

- seeking parent views routinely, not only when issues arise
- creating structured opportunities for feedback and dialogue
- involving parents in planning and reviewing support, particularly for SEND
- demonstrating how parent input has informed decisions.

This moves beyond consultation to genuine partnership, where parents feel heard, valued, and influential.

Ensuring equitable access to systems and opportunities

Schools reflect on whether their systems work equally well for all families.

In practice, this means:

- identifying which groups of parents experience barriers to engagement and why
- adjusting approaches to reach underrepresented families
- offering flexible opportunities for participation and engagement
- removing procedural or systemic barriers that may exclude some families.

This ensures that inclusion is not assumed but actively achieved.

Key expectations for schools

Schools are expected to:

- ensure all communication is accessible, inclusive, and responsive, meeting the diverse needs of families
- actively remove barriers to participation and engagement, including language, digital access, and financial constraints
- promote and enable parent voice, ensuring parents are partners in decision-making
- adopt a co-productive approach, particularly for children with SEND or additional needs
- recognise and respond to inequalities, taking a proactive approach to inclusion
- ensure that all families are represented and supported, particularly those who may be less visible
- regularly review systems and practice to ensure they are equitable and inclusive
- value diversity within the school community, recognising the strengths and contributions of all families.

Hampshire approach

Schools adopting this framework place inclusion, equity, and voice at the centre of their partnership with families.

They recognise that:

Effective parent partnership is only achieved when all families can participate fully, feel heard and experience a genuine sense of inclusion.

Through accessible communication, equitable practice and meaningful co-production, schools create partnerships that reflect the diversity of their communities and support improved outcomes for all children and young people.

Pillar 4: Proactive and preventative

Safeguarding and trusting partnerships

Why it matters

Safeguarding is most effective when it is underpinned by strong, trusting relationships between schools and families. Parents and carers are critical partners in keeping children safe, and effective safeguarding requires open, honest, and respectful communication that enables concerns to be identified and addressed early.

Statutory guidance, including *Keeping Children Safe in Education* and *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, emphasises the importance of building collaborative relationships with families. These frameworks promote strengths-based practice, professional curiosity, and meaningful family participation, recognising that safeguarding is most effective when schools and families work together. The guidance further elaborates that practitioners may need to **act without parental knowledge** where necessary to protect the child or enable effective multi-agency action.

Trust is central to this partnership. Where parents feel judged, blamed, or excluded, they are less likely to share concerns or participate with support. Conversely, where schools adopt an approach rooted in empathy, transparency and respect, families are more likely to seek help early and participate in solutions.

Attendance is a key safeguarding indicator and is strongly shaped by relationships. National guidance highlights that attendance difficulties are often symptoms of wider challenges, including anxiety, unmet need, belonging, and family circumstances. Addressing attendance therefore requires a relational and supportive approach, rather than one focused solely on compliance.

Effective safeguarding partnerships contribute to:

- earlier identification of risk and need
- increased parental participation and engagement with support.
- improved attendance and reduced persistent absence.
- stronger multi-agency collaboration
- reduced escalation to crisis intervention.

Safeguarding is therefore not a standalone function, but a relational process that depends on trust, communication, and partnership with families.

What this looks like in practice

Safeguarding and trusting partnerships are characterised by clarity, consistency, and a shared commitment to the child's wellbeing.

Building trust before safeguarding concerns arise

Effective safeguarding begins long before concerns escalate. Schools establish relationships with families that enable open communication and trust.

In practice, this includes:

- ensuring parents understand how safeguarding systems work.
- being transparent about processes and expectations.
- creating a culture where families feel safe to raise concerns.
- maintaining consistency in communication and response.

By investing in relationships early, schools create the conditions for effective safeguarding when it is needed.

Clear and compassionate safeguarding communication

Communication during safeguarding situations is managed with sensitivity, clarity, and respect.

- effective practice includes:
- explaining concerns clearly and factually
- avoiding blame or accusatory language
- recognising the emotional impact on families
- ensuring parents understand what will happen next
- providing a named contact for ongoing communication.

This approach reduces anxiety, promotes understanding and supports constructive engagement.

Attendance as a relational and safeguarding priority

Attendance is approached as a shared responsibility, rooted in understanding rather than enforcement.

Schools adopt a graduated approach:

- **listen and understand** the reasons behind absence
- **facilitate support** to address barriers
- **formalise support** where necessary.

Communication reflects national guidance by:

- assuming positive intent
- sharing absence in days and lessons rather than percentages
- focusing on the child's experience, belonging, and future outcomes
- avoiding language that implies blame or poor parenting.

This ensures attendance conversations are supportive, purposeful, and effective and work toward removing barriers so that the child can return to being educated in their community, in their classrooms.

Working in partnership to identify and address need.

Safeguarding concerns are addressed collaboratively, recognising that parents are key partners in understanding and supporting the child.

This includes:

- using professional curiosity to explore underlying factors
- involving parents in planning and decision-making as well as mitigating risks
- recognising strengths within the family
- co-ordinating with wider services where appropriate.

A strengths-based approach ensures that families feel respected and engaged, even in difficult circumstances.

Consistency and clarity in systems and expectations

Trust is strengthened when school systems are clear, consistent, and dependable.

In practice, this means:

- clear processes for raising and responding to concerns
- consistent messaging across staff
- timely and appropriate follow-up
- transparency about decisions and actions.

This reduces misunderstanding and builds confidence in the school's safeguarding approach.

Key expectations for schools

Schools are expected to:

- **place relationships at the centre of safeguarding practice**, recognising trust as essential.
- **communicate with clarity, empathy, and respect**, particularly in sensitive situations.
- **adopt a strengths-based approach**, avoiding blame and promoting collaboration.
- **ensure parents understand safeguarding processes**, roles, and expectations.
- **treat attendance as a safeguarding priority**, using a relational and supportive approach to return to learning.
- **use a graduated response to attendance concerns**, focused on understanding and support and minimising learning gaps.
- **provide a named, consistent point of contact** for families.
- **collaborate with parents and external agencies** to address need and plan transition back to school.
- **maintain clear, consistent, and transparent systems** for safeguarding and communication.

Hampshire approach

Schools adopting this framework recognise that effective safeguarding is built on trusting partnerships with families.

They understand that:

When parents feel respected, informed, and supported, they are more likely to participate and engage openly, enabling earlier intervention and better outcomes for children.

Through relational practice, clear communication and a shared commitment to wellbeing, schools create safeguarding systems that are not only effective, but inclusive, compassionate, and sustainable.

Pillar 5: Collaborative and community focussed

Being bothered, belonging, and mattering

Why it matters

A strong sense of belonging is fundamental to children and young people's success in education. When children feel known, valued, accepted, and included within their school community, they are more likely to attend regularly, engage in learning and achieve positive outcomes.

International research, including OECD PISA (2023) studies, consistently demonstrates that belonging is linked to improved academic outcomes, wellbeing, and participation. Pupils who feel they belong are more motivated, more resilient, and more likely to form positive relationships with peers and adults.

Belonging is not shaped solely by the child's in-school experience. It is significantly influenced by the quality of relationships between school and home. When parents and carers feel welcomed, respected, and included, this strengthens the child's own sense of connection to the school.

There is a clear and reinforcing relationship between belonging, improved attendance, emotional well-being, resilience and academic engagement and outcomes (Haugen et al.: 2025)

Conversely, where children or families feel disconnected, misunderstood, or excluded, attendance and engagement often decline.

Every interaction between school and family contributes to a child's sense of belonging. This includes both formal processes and everyday communication. Schools therefore play a critical role in creating a culture where all families feel part of the school community.

Promoting belonging contributes directly to:

- improved attendance and reduced absence
- increased engagement in learning
- better emotional wellbeing
- stronger relationships across the school community
- improved outcomes for all pupils, particularly those who are vulnerable.

Belonging is therefore not an abstract concept, but a central outcome of effective parent partnership and inclusive school culture.

What this looks like in practice

Belonging is created through consistent, intentional practice across all aspects of school life. It is experienced through relationships, communication, and the everyday actions of staff.

Creating a culture where families feel known and valued.

Schools actively foster an environment where all families feel welcomed and included.

This includes:

- ensuring that all parents and carers feel recognised and respected
- valuing the diversity of the school community
- creating opportunities for families to be involved in school life
- promoting positive, respectful interactions always.

This culture sets the foundation for strong partnerships and shared commitment.

Using communication to reinforce belonging

Communication is used intentionally to strengthen connection, participation and engagement.

Effective practice includes:

- framing messages in ways that emphasise the child's experience, relationships, and development
- highlighting positive aspects of school life, such as friendships, achievements, and participation
- personalising communication wherever possible
- ensuring that communication is regular and not solely linked to concerns.

Attendance communication reflects this approach, focusing on:

- the child's sense of belonging and daily experience
- the benefits of being in school for both learning and wellbeing
- encouraging and recognising effort.

This approach is more effective in promoting engagement than messages focused solely on rules, compliance, or data.

Connecting belonging, attendance, participation and engagement

Schools make explicit the link between belonging and attendance, recognising that attendance improves when children feel connected.

In practice, this includes:

- exploring absence through the lens of belonging and engagement
- using conversations to understand the child's experience of school
- supporting pupils to re-establish connection following absence
- reinforcing positive routines and relationships.

This ensures that attendance strategies are rooted in understanding, rather than solely in monitoring or enforcement.

Ensuring consistency in everyday interactions

Belonging is built through repeated, consistent experiences. Every interaction contributes to how children and families feel about the school.

This includes:

- warm and respectful daily interactions with pupils and parents
- consistent expectations and approaches across staff
- ensuring that families receive a coherent and unified experience of the school.
- recognising that small interactions have cumulative impact.

Consistency strengthens trust and reinforces a sense of safety and connection.

Embedding belonging within whole-school culture

Belonging is not the responsibility of one team or role, but a whole-school priority.

Schools ensure that:

- policies and systems reflect inclusive and relational values
- staff understand their role in promoting belonging
- leadership models inclusive and respectful practice
- the importance of belonging is consistently reinforced.

This creates a shared understanding and collective responsibility across the school community.

Key expectations for schools

Schools are expected to:

- **prioritise belonging as a central outcome** of their work with children and families
- **ensure all families feel welcomed, valued, and included**, regardless of background or circumstance
- **use communication to strengthen connection and engagement**, not just convey information
- **link attendance approaches to belonging**, focusing on the child's experience and relationships
- **promote positive, consistent interactions** across all aspects of school life
- **recognise the impact of every interaction** on a child and family's sense of belonging
- **embed belonging within policies, systems, and leadership practice.**
- **create a culture where all members of the community feel they are part of the school.**

Hampshire approach

Schools adopting this framework place belonging at the heart of their practice.

They recognise that:

Children and young people are most likely to succeed when they feel they belong—and this is strengthened through positive, respectful, and inclusive relationships between school and home.

Toolkit Strands

Strand 1 – Relational practice and trust

1. Relationship-building audit tool		
Pillar 1	Self-review questions	RAG rating/plan for improvement
Early relationship building.	Do all families receive positive contact within the first half term? Are relationships established before concerns arise? Do transition processes prioritise relationship-building? Is the school welcoming to parents and accessible should they wish to approach a staff member (through appropriate routes)?	
Consistency and communication.	Do parents know who their named contact is? Is communication consistent across staff? Are responses timely and respectful?	
Tone and trust.	Does communication assume positive intent? Do parents feel listened to and understood? Are difficult conversations handled with empathy?	
Inclusion in relationships.	Are relationships equally strong across all groups of parents? Are some families not currently engaging? Why? Are adjustments made for diverse needs (SEND, neurodiversity, etc.)?	

2. Relational language

Scenario	Purpose and key principles	Script
Positive first contact script (start of year/ transition points/in year admissions).	To establish early trust and set a positive tone for partnership. Focus on strengths. Invite parent voice. Set expectation of partnership. Be warm and genuine	<i>"Hello, I'm [name], and I just wanted to take a moment to introduce myself and say how much we're looking forward to working with [child's name] this year."</i> <i>"I'd really like to understand a bit more about [child's name] from your perspective – what they enjoy, what helps them, and anything you'd like us to know."</i> <i>"If you ever have questions or concerns, please feel able to get in touch – we want to work together."</i>
Early concern.	To support staff in raising concerns in a constructive, non-blaming way. No blame or assumptions. Use neutral, factual language. Prioritise listening. Focus on shared outcomes.	Step 1: open with connection: <i>"Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today."</i> Step 2: share observations (fact-based): <i>"We've noticed that [child's name] has been finding [specific area] difficult recently..."</i> Step 3: invite parent perspective: <i>"I wanted to ask how things have been from your point of view."</i> Step 4: listen and acknowledge: <i>"That's really helpful to understand — thank you for sharing that."</i> Step 5: work together: <i>"Let's think together about what might help."</i>
Repairing relationships.	To rebuild trust where relationships have become strained. Be open and non-defensive. Listen fully before responding. Focus on rebuilding trust, not defending decisions.	Step 1: acknowledge: <i>"I feel like things may have been difficult recently, and I wanted to take time to talk that through."</i> Step 2: take responsibility where appropriate: <i>"If there are ways we could have communicated or supported differently, we'd really like to understand that."</i> Step 3: invite parent voice: <i>"Can you tell me how this has felt from your perspective?"</i> Step 4: rebuild: <i>"What would help us move forward positively together?"</i>

3. Relational communication checklist

Use before sending any communication.

- Is this respectful and clear?
- Does it assume positive intent?
- Is the tone calm and professional?
- Could this be misinterpreted as blaming?
- Does it include a named contact?
- Does it invite dialogue rather than close it down?
- Would this be better as a phone call or meeting?
- Have I considered the emotional impact?

4. Named contact guidance

- Every family has a clearly identified named contact.
- This is communicated early and consistently.

The named contact:

- knows the child
- builds an ongoing relationship
- acts as the main point of communication.

5. Good practice

- Use names in all written communication.
- Avoid generic 'school' messaging for relational matters.
- Ensure handovers are smooth if staff change.

6. Neurodiversity-affirming practice prompt tool

Staff prompts.

- Have I recognised parent expertise?
- Am I describing the child in a strengths-based way?
- Have I avoided deficit-based language?
- Have I checked my assumptions about behaviour or presentation?
- Have I considered that the parent may also need adjusted communication?

7. Language shift examples

Instead of: “*struggles with behaviour*”

Use: “*may need support with...*”

8. Barriers to engagement - early warning checklist

Purpose.	To identify potential relationship breakdown early.
Signs.	• Reduced communication from parents. • Increasing absence or lateness. • Missed meetings. • Escalating concerns or frustration. • Requests for reduced timetable. • Discussions about leaving school.
Response.	• Initiate supportive conversation early. • Explore underlying concerns. • Prioritise listening and responding to correspondence. • Offer collaborative problem-solving.

9. Staff reflection tool

Purpose.	To embed relational practice across teams.
Discussion prompts.	• When do parents typically hear from us? • Would parents describe us as approachable? • Do we listen as much as we speak? • How do we respond when parents challenge us? • Are we building relationships or managing problems?

Strand 2 – Supporting learning and engagement

1. Parental engagement audit tool		
Area	Self-review questions	Actions/development
Supporting learning.	- Do we provide parents with clear guidance on how to support learning at home? - Is this guidance practical and accessible? - Do parents understand what their child is learning?	
Communication.	- Is communication about learning regular and clear? - Do we focus on next steps, not just reporting progress? - Do we create opportunities for two-way dialogue? - Do we create opportunities for two-way dialogue?	
Accessibility and inclusion.	- Are engagement opportunities accessible to all families? - Do we consider timing, format, and confidence levels? - Are some families currently not engaging? Why?	
Transitions for all points of entry.	- Do we prioritise relationship-building at transition points? - Do parents feel informed and prepared?	
Parental confidence.	- Do parents feel confident supporting learning? - Do we unintentionally create anxiety or confusion?	

2. Transition communication tool

A. Transition checklist (*school use*)

Before transition.	• Contact family early to introduce the main person of contact and discuss the concept of using the buddy system, not all students want the offer. • Gather key information from all stakeholders about previous and current vulnerabilities to support the student and family. • Plan for belonging and inclusion by informing staff about key information to facilitate high-quality inclusive teaching. • Share clear expectations and listen to parent voice. • Where there have been gaps in schooling, plans must be made to offer support to students and families during the induction process.
During transition.	• Provide accessible information to families about school processes and systems, bearing in mind family's needs. • Offer opportunities for questions so that barriers may be addressed early to build successes. • Create welcoming experiences by ensuring that all staff involved in the induction process understand their roles
After transition.	• Follow up with family at pre planned times to see if they need any support with settling into the area and school community. • Check how they feel their child is settling in and offer advice and support if needs are identified. • Act early on identified needs, schools must have systems for staff to raise matters where they feel a child needs support. • Maintain contact must continue to meet the student until they settle in.

3. Barriers to engagement checklist

Barriers	Consider	Response
Practical barriers.	• Timing of meetings. • Transport. • Childcare.	• Offer flexibility. • Simplify communication. • Provide reassurance. • Prioritise relationship-building. • Break information into manageable chunks. • Avoid overwhelming parents. • Provide reassurance where needed. • Offer support, not just expectations. • Check: • Could this communication cause anxiety? • Is the tone supportive and respectful? • Have I made expectations clear and achievable? • Am I avoiding blame or pressure?
Communication barriers.	• Language complexity. • Digital access. • Too much information.	
Confidence barriers.	• Parent confidence in supporting learning. • Previous negative experiences.	
Wellbeing barriers.	• Parental stress or mental health. • Competing pressures. • Work related and financial pressures.	

4. Explaining learning clearly – staff prompt tool

Staff prompts

- Can I explain this without jargon?
- Have I made this practical?
- Would a parent understand what to do next?
- Have I focused on key priorities?

Example shift:

“Your child is working at expected standard in maths.” Can be rephrased as “Your child is learning to solve two-step problems. A great way to support this is practising at home using real-life situations like shopping.”

5. Follow-up and engagement tracker (simple tool)

To ensure sustained participation and engagement, not one-off contact. Keep a record of date, purpose, outcome, agreed actions and follow up date.

It helps ensure consistency, accountability, and relationship continuity.

6. Staff reflection tool

Purpose

To embed a culture of participation and engagement across teams in school.

Discussion prompts

- Do parents understand how to support learning?
- Are we making learning accessible to all families?
- Do our systems make engagement easy or difficult?
- Are we reaching all parents equally?
- Do we listen as much as we inform?

Strand 3 – Inclusion, equity, and voice

1. Inclusion and equity audit tool		
Area	Self-review questions	Action
Accessibility of communication.	- Are communications accessible to all families (language, format, clarity)? - Do we provide alternatives for parents with limited digital access? - Are key messages understood by all parents?	
Equity of engagement.	- Which groups of parents experience fewer barriers to engagement? - Do we understand why? - Are adjustments made to support those families?	
Parent voice.	- Do we routinely seek parent views? - Are parents involved in decision-making? - Do we demonstrate how parent feedback influences change?	
SEND and additional needs.	- Are parents treated as partners in planning and reviewing support? - Do we recognise and value their expertise?	
System barriers.	- Do any school systems unintentionally exclude families? - Are processes flexible and responsive?	
Before sending communication, check	- Do we need translation or interpretation? - Is the format accessible (digital, paper, visual)? - Have we considered families with limited literacy? - Does this communication reach all families equally, e.g. EAL families	

2. Financial inclusion (cost of living) checklist

Review

- Are there hidden costs in the school day (uniform, trips, equipment)?
- Could any costs prevent participation?
- Are families aware of available support?
- Is communication about money sensitive and discreet?

In practice

- Offer flexible payment options.
- Provide discreet access to support.
- Avoid assumptions about financial circumstances.
- Ensure no child is excluded due to inability to pay

3. Parent voice tool

A. Parent voice survey template (core areas)

- Communication (clarity, timing, tone).
- Feeling listened to.
- Understanding of child's learning.
- Ability to raise concerns.
- Inclusion and belonging.

B. Parent voice reflection questions

- What are parents telling us?
- Are there consistent themes?
- Which groups are not represented?
- What have we changed as a result?

4. SEND co-production meeting template to be used alongside www.hants.gov.uk/socialcareandhealth/childrenandfamilies/early-help

Structure

1. Welcome and purpose: *"We are here to work together to support [child's name]."*
2. Strengths: *"What are [child's] strengths from your perspective?"*
3. Parent insight: *"What works well at home?"*
4. School perspective: Clear, factual observations.
5. Planning: *"What can we put in place together?"*
6. Agreement:
 - shared actions
 - review point.

5. Engagement equity mapping tool

Identify and act

- Which parents attend meetings? Are there patterns (EAL, SEND, socio-economic factors)?
- Which respond to communication?
- Which groups are underrepresented? Are barriers related to timing, language, confidence?

6. System barrier review tool

Purpose

To identify structural barriers within school systems.

Review systems such as:

- communication platforms
- meeting structures
- information sharing processes.
- parent consultation opportunities.

Strand 4 – Safeguarding and trusting partnerships

1. Safeguarding partnership audit tool to be used alongside www.hampshirescp.org.uk/professionals/toolkits/strengthening-parental-relationships/		
Area	Self-review questions	Actions
Trust and relationships.	- Do parents feel safe to raise concerns with us? - Do we build relationships before safeguarding issues arise? - Are parents treated as partners in safeguarding?	
Communication.	- Is safeguarding communication clear and transparent? - Do we explain processes in an accessible way? - Is communication respectful and non-judgemental?	
Attendance practice to be used alongside www.hants.gov.uk/educationandlearning/behaviour-attendance-parents. Key principles. - Use days/lessons, not percentages. - Assume positive intent. - Focus on child experience. - Offer support, not blame.	- Do we approach attendance as a safeguarding issue? - Do we seek to understand underlying causes of absence? - Do we use a relational approach rather than enforcement?	
Consistency.	- Are safeguarding messages consistent across staff? - Do parents know who their point of contact is?	

2. Difficult conversation framework

Structure

1. Prepare: Clarify purpose and use facts, not assumptions.
2. Open positively: *"Thank you for meeting with me..."*
3. Share concern by being clear and factual whilst using a calm tone.
4. Listen, allow space, and avoid interruption.
5. Acknowledge: *"I can hear that this is difficult..."*
6. Work together: *"Let's think about what will help moving forward."*
7. Agree actions using clear next steps and set a date for follow-up.

Strand 5 – Belonging

Purpose

This toolkit supports schools to actively create a culture of belonging for children, young people, and their families. It focuses on ensuring that all interactions, systems, and communications contribute to families feeling valued, included and connected to the school community.

1. Belonging audit tool		
Area	Self-review questions	RAG/actions
School culture.	• Do all families feel welcomed and valued? • Is diversity recognised and celebrated? • Do families feel part of the school community?	
Communication.	• Does communication reinforce connection and inclusion? • Is communication personalised where possible? • Do we communicate positively as well as when concerns arise?	
Attendance and engagement.	• Do we link attendance to belonging and experience, not just compliance? • Do pupils want to come to school? • Do families feel motivated to engage?	
Representation.	• Do all families see themselves reflected in the school community? • Are some voices or groups less visible?	

2. Welcome and belonging communication toolkit

Welcome message script (all admissions).	<i>"We are really pleased to welcome you and your family to our school community."</i> <i>"We want every child and family to feel that they belong here, and we are committed to getting to know you."</i> <i>"Please do not hesitate to get in touch – we are here to work together."</i>
EBSA/EBSNA belonging.	• <i>"Being in school helps [child's name] build friendships and feel part of the community."</i> • <i>"We want [child's name] to feel confident, happy and included every day."</i> • <i>"We've missed seeing [child's name] in school."</i> • <i>"I can see that this is a difficult time as a parent, please look after yourself too, do you need to talk through your challenges with the situation?"</i>
'Child experience' conversation tool.	• <i>"How does [child's name] feel about school at the moment?"</i> • <i>"What do they enjoy most?"</i> • <i>"Is there anything they find difficult or worrying?"</i>
Celebrating belonging and inclusion tool. Ask. • Who is being celebrated? • Who might be missing?	In practice • Celebrate a wide range of achievements (not just academic). • Share positive stories about pupils and families. • Recognise diversity within the school community. • Create opportunities for families to contribute.
Reconnection and reintegration tool (after absence, suspension, returning from direction offsite alternative provision, etc).	1. Warm welcome back – <i>"It's really good to have you back — we've missed you."</i> 2. Check-in. – How is the child feeling? – What support might help? 3. Gradual reintegration only if needed and evidence shows this and must be time bound. – Flexible support. – Adjust expectations. 4. Maintain contact with family. – Regular updates. – Ongoing reassurance.

Key principles.	• Warm and inclusive tone. • Emphasis on belonging. • Invitation to connect. • Focus on relationships and experience. • Personalise where possible. • Recognise effort.
4. Daily interaction prompt tool	
Purpose	To embed belonging through consistent, everyday interactions.
Staff prompts.	• Have I greeted this parent/pupil warmly today? • Have I used names where possible? • Have I acknowledged something positive? • Have I created an opportunity for connection?
5. Representation and inclusion check	
Purpose.	To ensure all families feel reflected in the school.
Review.	• Communication materials (images, language) • Events and activities • Displays and environment. • Parent participation
Ask.	• Do all families see themselves reflected here? • Are any groups underrepresented?

6. Parent experience feedback tool

Example survey/forms questions.	• Do you feel welcomed by the school? • Do you feel your child belongs here? • Do you feel comfortable contacting the school? • Do you feel included in school life? • Do events, meetings and communication help you to support your child?
Follow-up.	• Share findings. • Act on feedback • Communicate changes

Staff CPD Themes

Embedding working with parents across school culture

Purpose

This professional development tool is designed to support staff in developing a shared, consistent approach to building **a culture of working collaboratively with families** across the school.

The framework: core themes

Staff training should be structured around the following interconnected themes.

- 1 Relationships and connection.**
 - Prioritising strong, trusting relationships with pupils and families.
 - Ensuring every child feels known, recognised and valued.
 - Creating consistent, positive daily interactions.
- 2 Inclusive communication.**
 - Using clear, respectful, and accessible language.
 - Building trust through empathetic and strengths-based communication.
 - Ensuring all families feel listened to and understood.
- 3 Attendance as a measure of belonging.**
 - Recognising that attendance is intricately linked to a child's sense of belonging.
 - Framing attendance conversations around care, support, and partnership.
 - Identifying and addressing barriers rather than assigning blame.
- 4 Equity, diversity, and inclusion.**
 - Actively celebrating diversity within the school community.
 - Ensuring inclusive practice for all pupils, including those with SEND.
 - Removing barriers to participation and engagement.
- 5 Whole-school culture.**
 - Creating a welcoming, consistent environment for all.
 - Embedding belonging in policies, systems, and decision-making.
 - Ensuring all staff understand their role in shaping culture.

CPD reflection and discussion tool

Use the prompts below in staff meetings, training sessions, or team reflection.

Reflective questions

- Do all children in our school feel that they belong? How do we know?
- Do all families feel welcomed, connected, and respected?
- Are we consistently prioritising belonging in our decisions and actions?
- How does our communication (verbal, written, digital) impact families?
- Do our attendance practices build trust or create barriers?
- Which groups of pupils or families might feel least connected, and why?
- What could we do differently to strengthen belonging across our school?

Final word

Everyday practice

Key principles for staff

- Belonging is everyone's responsibility.
- Every interaction matters.
- Make every child and family feel known and valued.
- Use communication to build connection, not just compliance.
- Approach attendance through support, not judgement and clearly plan reintegration.
- Focus on the lived experience of the child and making sure the child matters.
- Celebrate diversity and promote inclusion.
- Create a consistent, welcoming environment.

Expected impact

By embedding this framework, schools should see:

- improved pupil attendance, participation and engagement
- stronger relationships with families
- increased parental trust and communication.
- improved inclusion and equity
- a more consistent, positive whole-school culture.

Key legislation

Area	Legislation/guidance	Relevance to This guidance
Safeguarding.	<i>Keeping Children Safe in Education (2025).</i>	Emphasises partnership with parents, early help, and clear safeguarding communication.
Safeguarding systems.	<i>Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026).</i>	Reinforces multi-agency working and collaborative engagement with families.
Attendance.	<i>Working Together to Improve School Attendance (2024).</i>	Requires relational, supportive approaches and partnership with parents.
Attendance communication.	<i>DfE Guidance on Communicating with Parents about Attendance (2026).</i>	Promotes clear, empathetic, and consistent communication that supports trust, engagement, and improved attendance outcomes.
SEND.	<i>SEND Code of Practice (2015).</i>	Requires co-production with parents and recognition of parent voice.
Equality.	<i>Equality Act (2010).</i>	Ensures equitable and inclusive engagement with all families.
Behaviour and inclusion.	<i>Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2025).</i>	Emphasises relationships, personal development, and inclusive culture.
Data and communication.	<i>UK GDPR / Data Protection Act (2018).</i>	Requires appropriate, secure handling of parent and pupil information.
Alternative provision/EHE.	<i>DfE Guidance on Elective Home Education (DFE 2019).</i>	Reinforces importance of early relational intervention.
Relationships and sex education (RSE).	<i>Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education (DfE statutory guidance, 2019).</i>	Requires schools to consult with parents, communicate clearly about curriculum content, and build trust through transparent engagement.
Parental consultation.	<i>DfE RSE Statutory Guidance (2019) and governance expectations.</i>	Requires meaningful consultation with parents, consideration of views, and

		inclusive communication approaches.
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Glossary

Acronyms

EBSA – emotionally based school avoidance.

EBSNA – emotionally based school non-attendance (terms used to describe persistent difficulty attending school due to emotional distress, anxiety, or unmet need, rather than truancy).

EAL – English as an additional language.

EEF – Education Endowment Foundation (independent charity providing evidence-based guidance to improve teaching and learning).

EHCP – education, health, and care plan (statutory plan for children and young people with SEND, aged 0-25).

EHE – elective home education (when parents choose to educate their child at home rather than at school).

KCSIE – Keeping children safe in education (statutory safeguarding guidance for schools and colleges).

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD study measuring educational outcomes internationally).

SEND – special educational needs and disabilities.

Key terms

- **Co-production** – Working in genuine partnership with parents and carers, ensuring their voice shapes decisions and planning, particularly in SEND support.
- **Neurodiversity-affirming practice** – An approach that recognises and values neurological differences (e.g. autism, ADHD, dyslexia) as natural variations, avoiding deficit-based language and celebrating strengths.
- **Relational practice** – An approach that prioritises trust, empathy, and connection in all interactions, recognising that strong relationships are the foundation of effective support.
- **Strengths-based approach** – Focusing on what children, young people and families can do, their assets and capabilities, rather than deficits or problems.