



The things that matter! Are you kept informed?

FNF survey: experiences with schools

Many of Families Need Fathers' (FNF) members experience significant difficulty maintaining active and healthy relationships with their children. Schooling is an area in which non-resident parents (NRP's) often have to battle in order to keep informed and involved.

FNF conducted a survey amongst its members to gauge the sort of experiences NRP's have with schools, findings from which can be seen below.

59 individuals (men and women) responded to the questions concerning *experiences with schools*.

1. Do you receive correspondence from your child(ren)'s school(s)? (59 answers)

- 26 respondents (44%) said they had not received correspondence from their child(rens)' school(s).
- 33 respondents (56%) said they had received correspondence from their child(rens)' school(s).

2. Are you invited to parents' evenings? (58 answers)

- 28 respondents (49%) said they had not been invited to attend parents' evenings.
- 30 respondents (51%) said they had been invited to attend parents' evenings.

3. Do you feel that you are kept sufficiently involved and informed by the school(s)? 56 answers

- 42 (75%) respondents said they did not feel that they were kept sufficiently involved and informed.
- 14 (25%) respondents said they did feel that they were kept sufficiently involved and informed.

4. How would you like your current level of involvement to change? (sample of comments)

"All correspondence should automatically be sent to both parents."
"There needs to be consistency. Some schools are better than others."
"To be contacted directly, rather than hearing of issues third-hand."
"To be treated as a parent, not a non-resident, non-entity."

5. Other comments received:

"Correspondence was only received when I requested it."
"When I enquired why reports had not been sent, I was accused by the Head Teacher of using the school as a punch-bag to vent frustrations."
"Schools were cooperative when asked."
"I am unable to play an active role in my child's education if I am not provided with any information."

There were several comments that primary schools were better at communicating with non-resident parents than were secondary schools.

These findings show that we have a worrying situation where 44% of non-resident parents are not receiving any correspondence from their child(ren)'s school(s), and 49% are not being invited to attend parents' evenings. 75% of the NRP's who are not able to be involved find this situation unacceptable and have a wish for greater involvement and information. Strong messages which came out of the comments provided were that both parents should have equal access to any information relevant to their child(ren)'s education, and that consistency is needed throughout the education system in their approach to and communication with both parents.

A lack of communication from schools can often be down to a lack of awareness of the rights of any parent with parental responsibility to be kept informed.

Parental Responsibility (PR) confers equal status on both parents. Therefore, any NRP with PR should be dealt with by schools, doctors and dentists on an equal footing to the RP. As the Court of Appeal ruled in 1994 (Re H (A Minor) (Shared Residence) 1 FLR [1994] 717): "Since the father had a parental responsibility order, he was entitled to receive full comprehensive reports from the boy's school and full medical details from his general

practitioner....(he) is entitled to all rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child. The father is accordingly entitled to the same rights as the mother in regard to the receipt of any reports or documents which, for example, the school or doctor may hold."

What came across strongly from the survey was the need for the NRP to be **proactive** in their requests for information. With an understanding of one's own rights, one can inform those professionals who may not have such knowledge, and this can often lead to greater communication between the parent and, in this case, the teacher. Keeping involved and informed is a two-way process. The parent in question must push for this, but this pressure must be met by professionals who have an awareness of their duties to a child and both of its parents.

The Children's Plan was published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in December 2007 and opens with the aim of Ed Balls to "involve parents fully in their children's learning", presenting "partnership with parents" as a unifying theme of the plan. It recognises the wish of parents to be more involved in their children's education, and states that "schools see the benefit of greater engagement with parents." It sets out a number of practices which must be introduced through a new relationship between parents and schools, such as the opportunity for parents to attend information sessions when a child goes to a new school and parents having regular, up to date information on their child's attendance, behaviour and progress in learning.

It sets as a goal for 2020 parent satisfaction with the information and support they receive. Crucially, it acknowledges that many parents, in particular fathers, often feel "invisible to health and children's service professionals" and commits to "support(ing) families with whatever level of information and support they need, when they need it". It explicitly states that a new relationship is needed with parents "no matter what their personal circumstances – mothers, fathers, non-resident parents, lone parents and working parents".

These are bold announcements from the Government which need to be followed through in practice, so that in years to come we do not see children being unable to benefit from a parent's keen involvement in such a vital aspect of their lives as their education.

Useful references:

- Families Need Fathers website: *www.fnf.org.uk*, Law & Policy section, Schools
- *The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education*, Department for Education and Skills: an A5 leaflet showing research evidence which highlights the importance of the involvement of parents in their children's education. This can be downloaded from the Publications section of the Parents Centre website.
<http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/publications/>