

Team-Parent Meetings in a Special School: Participants' Views

A pilot scheme of joint parent/staff meetings was established in a school for autistic children. This offered parents and teachers an opportunity of being actively involved in assessment and goal setting for pupils. It also resulted in participants feeling empowered and facilitated the establishment of home/school networks.

YVONNE McCARTHY is a psychologist with the Brothers of Charity Services, Lota, Cork. **MARIAN LAWLESS** is a senior speech therapist with the Central Remedial Clinic, Dublin.

BACKGROUND

Parents' views of service delivery have been well documented in recent research (Glendenning, 1983; Mittler & McConachie, 1983; Swain & Eagle, 1987; McConkey and Conliffe, 1989). This research has documented how contact with staff has helped family adjustment. Humphries and Blundon (1985) confirmed this view noting that families expressed a need for more regular contact with staff and drew attention to their need for support and guidance. This action based research project investigated the effectiveness of Team/Parent meetings as a means to meet the expressed need for emotional and practical support.

THE PROJECT

Between September 1989 and January 1990 parents, teachers and relevant members of the multi-disciplinary teams including a psychologist and a speech therapist, attended regular meetings to agree on plans and goals to enhance the child's social, cognitive and communication skills. The meetings were planned to be reciprocal in nature and to further develop home and school liaison.

Children's ages ranged from four to seventeen years. Many had severe communication disorders, poor social relationships, stereotyped and disruptive behaviour.

ORGANISATION

Prior to the meetings, each pupil was individually assessed by a speech therapist, a

psychologist and a teacher. The findings were collated for presentation to parents. The meetings were held in a classroom; pupils' work was on view. The meeting was facilitated by one of the team.

The advantages of such meetings for the team are numerous. In particular it was found that the following issues could be addressed more effectively:

1. The nature of assessment;
2. Clarification of professionals' role for parents;
3. The parent's view;
4. Sharing feelings;
5. Skill identification;
6. A functional approach.

THE NATURE OF ASSESSMENT

Comprehensive assessment is dependent on Parent/Team partnership. At meetings parents are given the opportunity to specify their child's skills, community contact and the nature of their child's challenging behaviour within the home. This information, in combination with the results of formal psychological, academic and communication assessments provide a fuller picture of the child. Priority training needs become apparent and parents are directly consulted as to their aspirations and goals for the child. Therefore the goals which are set for the child, better reflect his/her needs at home and at school.

CLARIFICATION OF PROFESSIONALS' ROLE FOR PARENTS

When sharing information with parents, the skills of the various team members become apparent. The psychologist assesses progress and highlights strengths in the areas of social and self care skills, as well as motor and cognitive functioning.

The speech therapist evaluates current communication status and sets targets for further developments.

The teacher outlines progress in curriculum areas. Information from the three sources clarifies the expertise of the various members for the parents.

THE PARENTS' VIEWS

Parents describe alliances and values within the family, as well as their methods of

coping with challenging behaviour. Swain and Eagle (1987) have highlighted the benefits for staff when parents share their knowledge and skills with them. This information ensures a greater staff sensitivity which may lead to the rearrangement of goals in priority order in the light family goals. Likewise, the energy and support of siblings and members of the extended family can be harnessed to implement specific programmes.

SHARING FEELINGS

During the meetings, staff have opportunities to affirm parents by acknowledging their role in the child's development. This reduces the sense of isolation parents may feel. These meetings serve as intermittent official reminders for the team regarding the degree of each child's handicap. Strong emotions, such as grief and anger may surface. The dynamic of the team permits expression and sharing of these feelings, helping towards their resolution.

SKILL IDENTIFICATIONS

The need to outline for parents the personal independence skills recently acquired by day pupils has been highlighted by Hannon (1983). Research suggests that day pupils need to be given opportunities to practise their skills in order to maintain a level of personal independence equivalent to that of their peers in residential care. The parents are often surprised to hear of skills acquired by their child, such as, behaving well with class-mates in town, queuing and paying for a meal in a cafe, or choosing one or two items in a local shop.

Children's performances vary between home and school. Parents can provide information about their child's level of functioning at home which is useful to the teacher when planning the curriculum at school. Knowing that the child helps in the preparation of dinner at home, may prompt the teacher to suggest that weight and number concepts be incorporated into this routine. The teacher will also be able to help the parents to modify the methods they are using, in order to teach the child new skills. Using a consistent approach at home and at school results in more success for the child.

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

Using jargon and terminology can cause confusion among staff and also between staff and parents (Cromwell & Millar 1987, Wedick 1984). This procedure focuses attention on agreed aims and actions to bring about changes at classroom level,

curriculum content, school organisation and management at home. When interpreting a child's test performance the focus is not on child deficits and structured I.Q. test results but rather on functional assessments of daily living skills. Results are communicated using every day language and the use of jargon and technical terms is avoided.

PARENTS' RESPONSES

The effectiveness of the meetings was measured using questionnaires which were administered to fourteen parents and four teachers.

In general, parents found the meeting successful and the information which was presented easy to understand.

1. Thirteen parents found the information useful for working with their child.
2. Twelve parents wanted a written summary of the information.
3. Thirteen wished to continue to meet with the team as a group.
4. One parent preferred to meet with the members of the team individually.
5. Requests for follow-up meetings varied from once a month to once a year.
6. Most wished to meet once a term.

Comments on the meeting included:

"The meeting left nothing to be desired, and I appreciated meeting such a pleasant, energetic and optimistic team in the face of all the odds".

"I find meeting the team as a whole invaluable, as this ensures that everybody, i.e., home, school and residential staff is on the same wavelength, which is most important when working with a child with autism."

A suggestion by one parent represents the views expressed by other parents: "A written report on the previous meeting with copies for each person attending would be a great help. One could then refer to the points to be worked on during the intervening period, and discuss improvements or regressions."

TEACHERS' RESPONSES

The teachers also completed a questionnaire. Their responses indicated the following:

1. The most popular venue for a meeting was the classroom or an office within the school building.
2. Each teacher found the meetings were useful and felt that everybody had an opportunity to express his or her opinion.
3. The teachers indicated that the frequency of review meetings varied for each pupil, from once or twice a year to once a term.
4. Each teacher felt it was appropriate for the whole team to meet with parents together. This way, replies could be answered immediately by the relevant team members, rather than postponing decisions until a later interview. However, the need to be sensitive to each family situation was recognised. They acknowledged one parent's need for individual sessions.

Suggestions to improve the meetings included:

1. The use of an appointment card with a confirmation slip.
2. The need to ensure careful planning prior to the meeting to provide parents with an outline of the pupil's school programme.
3. Setting a time limit to the meetings.
4. Offering the parents a cup of tea during the meeting.
5. Encourage fathers and siblings to come along.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The procedure described provides a formal structure for team/parent contact. The parents' request for greater frequency of meetings was higher than that anticipated by the teachers and the support team. For the team, it highlighted parents' needs for regular consultation and support.

This system provides the school with a regular support service. It allows for planning of regular reviews and also prevents crisis referrals.

The model may be particularly useful for families with children with severe and on-going behavioural and communication difficulties. It is also effective with school entrants and school leavers, because of the traumas often associated with transitional phases for parents of children with special needs. To ensure that parents are genuine partners they need to know in advance the purpose of the meetings and the areas that will be discussed. Because parents are under pressure, goals for their children can become blurred. Completion of a check-list of skills such as *Pathways to Independence* by Jefferey and Cheseldine (1982) will clarify the child's present level of

functioning and indicate future progression. The process of working in a group demands experience and knowledge, facilitation and counselling skills. The team recognises its need for further training in this area.

Finally, this project has endeavoured to lend support to the belief that the school values parents as partners in delivering a service to their children. As long-term regular consumers of the service, they should be more centrally involved both in administration and service planning. Only when parents are involved in deciding how the service develops, will that service meet their needs effectively.

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