

Grimwood, Tom and Snell, Laura (2021) Parental assets and influence on young people's decision-making: engaging 'hard to reach' parents. Health and Society Knowledge Exchange (HASKE). (Unpublished)

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/5940/>

***Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.***

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
  - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).

# Parental assets and influence on young people's decision-making: engaging 'hard to reach' parents

---

Health and Society Knowledge Exchange  
(HASKE)



Cumbria Collaborative  
Outreach Programme



**January 2021**

This project was commissioned by Hello Future and conducted by Health and Society Knowledge Exchange (HASKE), University of Cumbria.

The report was authored by Dr Tom Grimwood and Dr Laura Snell.

# Contents

Contents .....	ii
List of figures.....	iv
List of tables .....	iv
1. Introduction .....	5
2. Methodology.....	6
2.1 Literature Review.....	6
2.2 Comparison of literature with Parent and Carer Survey.....	7
2.3 Interviews with parents and carers .....	7
3. Findings: literature review.....	10
3.1 Introduction .....	10
3.2 Defining ‘hard to reach’ parents and families.....	10
3.2.1 Defining ‘hard to reach’ .....	10
3.2.2 Defining parental engagement.....	11
3.2.3 Wider indicators .....	12
3.2.4 Being cautious with wider indicators.....	13
3.3 Barriers to parental engagement.....	14
3.3.1 Practical or logistical barriers.....	14
3.3.2 Perceived barriers.....	14
3.3.3 Organisational barriers .....	15
3.3.4 Holistic barrier models.....	16
3.4 Enablers to parental engagement .....	16
3.4.1 Educating and supporting parents/families .....	17
3.4.2 Building positive relationships.....	17
3.4.3 Effective initiatives.....	18
3.5 Summary.....	19

4.	Findings: Parent and Carer Surveys .....	21
4.1	Parent and carer experiences of education .....	21
4.2	Parent and carer levels of confidence about supporting their children .....	23
4.3	Parent and carer perceptions of barriers to supporting their children through education 25	
4.4	Discussions with children about future plans .....	27
4.5	Resources that would enable parents to further support for their children .....	29
5.	Findings: interviews with ‘hard to reach’ parents.....	32
5.1	Participant demographics .....	32
5.2	Discussions with children about their future .....	32
5.3	Factors influencing parental support .....	34
5.4	Difficulties experienced by parents when supporting their children .....	38
5.5	Useful resources for supporting decision-making about the future .....	41
6.	Conclusions .....	43
6.1	Conclusions .....	43
7.	References .....	45

## List of figures

Figure 1: Highest qualification of parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020) .....	21
Figure 2: Sources of information used by parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020).....	28
Figure 3: Resources used to inform discussions according to the highest qualification of parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020).....	29
Figure 4: Additional resources required according to the highest qualification of parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020).....	31

## List of tables

Table 1: Location of participants and their child's year group.....	32
---	----

## 1. Introduction

Health and Society Knowledge Exchange (HASKE) was commissioned by Hello Future to explore the role of parental influence in young people's decision-making about their future. The aim of this project was to explore the context of Cumbrian 'hard to reach' parents and carers, and the routes to engagement with them. This work built upon HASKE's previous work on an asset-based approach to widening participation, which mapped the variations of assets available to and engaged by young people in Cumbria.

Outreach programmes have often found it difficult to engage parents as part of their activities, despite research showing that parental influence can be a key factor in young people's decision-making over whether to apply to University and apprenticeships. Understanding parent's aspirations for their children in the context of their own social and cultural capital is key to improving the number of applicants to University, but this is all the more significant in deprived areas and traditionally 'hard-to-reach' groups.

The project consists of the following:

- 1) an initial deep dive of literature concerning 'hard to reach' parents, focussing on the barriers and enablers to engagement. This literature came predominantly from the education arena, but also included psychology, sociology and other appropriate subject areas. The literature review also included apposite grey literature, for example, policy work from The Children's Society, Family Action, Action for Children as well as both the Scottish and English governments.
- 2) The findings of the literature review were compared with those from Hello Future's parent and carer surveys in order to consider what the unique challenges Cumbrian parents may face.
- 3) The findings were used to inform a number of email interviews to explore in more detail the context of Cumbrian 'hard to reach' parents and carers, and the routes to engagement with them.

## 2. Methodology

This research project involved three key stages:

1. A review of literature concerning 'hard to reach' parents
2. A comparison of the findings of the literature review with the findings of the Hello Future Parent and Carer Surveys
3. Interviews with parents and carers.

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Cumbria Research Ethics Panel.

### 2.1 Literature Review

The literature review was focussed on hard to reach parents, including those who experience long-term and/or inter-generational unemployment, and sought to identify the barriers and enablers to engagement.

Academic literature was searched through the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Soc Index, ProQuest Central Journals Collection and Taylor & Francis Journals online. The search terms included *hard-to-reach parents/hard to reach parents, hard-to-reach families/hard to reach families, engagement*. The Boolean operators 'AND' 'and' 'OR' were used to combine the search terms (e.g. *hard-to-reach parents AND engagement*). Article titles and abstracts were reviewed, and relevant papers were then selected for inclusion in the review. The grey literature was sourced through an internet search, which included government websites and organisations aimed at supporting children and families.

The inclusion of literature was restricted to sources published between 2010 and 2020, written in English and relevant to the UK. In addition, the selected literature was focused on the engagement of hard to reach parents/families, including barriers and enablers; hard to reach parents/families and unemployment; and hard to reach parents with children of any age (early years, primary, secondary, further and higher education).



## 2.2 Comparison of literature with Parent and Carer Survey

Hello Future had previously conducted two surveys of parents and carers across Cumbria in 2018<sup>1</sup> and 2020<sup>2</sup>. The findings from both reports, along with the raw survey data, were compared with the findings from the literature review to explore how the challenges and enablers for Cumbrian parents when supporting their children with decision-making compared to the broader national and international picture.

## 2.3 Interviews with parents and carers

It is important to note that the purpose of the interview stage of the research was not to provide ‘representative’ viewpoints or summaries of the experiences of people within certain demographics, but rather to gather together the lived experiences of parents ‘on the ground’, to place the findings from the first two stages into a more concrete context.

The recruitment of Cumbrian parents and carers proved to be challenging for this project, and involved three separate attempts during December 2020 and January 2021. As might be expected for a project aimed at those parents who do not traditionally engage with outreach activities, recruitment involved a number of stages.

In early December 2020, the HASKE research team drafted an email invitation for Hello Future to share with individuals who had previously provided their contact details via the 2020 parent and carer survey. Hello Future use the Office for Students<sup>3</sup> website to check the postcodes of the survey respondents who gave permission to be contacted again, to ensure that they lived in an area of participation deprivation, which was one of Hello Future’s target wards. The email invitation was sent to nine parents and carers across Cumbria. The parents and carers were invited to take part in a telephone or online interview to discuss their experiences of supporting their children with decision-making about their future. Hello Future offered a £25 Amazon voucher as

---

<sup>1</sup> Hello Future (2018) *Parent and Carer Voice Survey Data Analysis*. ABS Insight Limited. [https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Hello-Future-Parent-and-Carer-Voice-18\\_19.pdf](https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Hello-Future-Parent-and-Carer-Voice-18_19.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Hello Future (2020) *Parent and Carer Voice Survey Data Analysis, Phase Two, October 2020*. ABS Insight Limited. <https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Hello-Future-Parent-and-Carer-Voice-FINAL-October-2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Office for Students (2020) *Young participation by area*. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/search-by-postcode/>

an incentive for taking part in the research. The invitation was sent via Hello Future's Mailchimp account, which enabled the emails to be tracked; although six of the emails were opened within the first few days, none of the parents or carers engaged with the research.

In early January 2021, a second recruitment attempt was made by sending another email to the same nine parents and carers. A more personal approach was taken with this invitation as one of the Hello Future team members sent it from their own University of Cumbria email account. The parents and carers were again invited to participate in an interview, either via telephone or online, and the incentive of £25 was offered. None of the parents or carers engaged with the research invitation.

In mid-January 2021, HASKE and Hello Future explored alternative recruitment strategies to engage parents and carers in the project, and two amendments were made to the methodology: social media was used as a mechanism for advertising the research, and the data collection method was changed to an email interview. Hello Future used Facebook to advertise for research participants (including via local community groups such as Carlisle Youth Zone), and offered a £25 Amazon voucher as an incentive for participating in an email interview. The invitation was aimed at parents and carers with children in school years 9 – 13, and located in the following target areas:

- Barrow (areas: Barrow Island, Central, Hindpool, Holborn Hill, Risedale and Walney North);
- Carlisle and Eden (areas: Botcherby, Currock, Denton Holme, Harraby, Longtown and Rockcliffe, Morton, Penrith Pategill and Upperby);
- West Cumbria (areas: Aspatria, Clifton, Distington, Frizington, Moorclose, Moss Bay, Sandwith [including Mirehouse, Woodhouse and Kells], Silloth and St Michael's Upperby).

Initially, 22 individuals responded to the Facebook post, but eight were unsuitable as their children were not in school years 9-13. The remaining 14 individuals were invited to take part in the research, and provided with a participant information sheet and consent form. Despite their initial interest, the parents and carers were slow to return the consent form, and only one parent completed the email interview. In order to encourage more participants to engage with the project, one day prior to the data collection deadline, the HASKE research team combined the consent statement with the interview questions so that the parents and carers were only required to read and complete a single document. Reminder emails were then sent to the 13 parents and carers who had expressed an interest in the research, with the interview questions attached as a Word document and also

included in the email itself. The reminder email was successful in recruiting an additional five participants. In total, six parents and carers completed the email interviews.

The email interview contained five questions:

- 1) How many children do you have and what stage of education are they currently?
- 2) Have you and your child talked much about what they want to do in the future? What have you talked about and how did you feel about the discussion?
- 3) Do you think your education or work experience has influenced how you support your child with making decisions about their future?
- 4) Is there anything you find difficult when supporting your child?
- 5) Is there anything that has helped you to support your child with decisions about the future?

The interview data was anonymised and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. The content of the parents' responses were analysed and a selection of quotations were used to explore the parents' assets and influence on young people's decision-making.

## 3. Findings: literature review

### 3.1 Introduction

This literature review explores existing research and grey literature about hard to reach parents and families. The aim of the review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the main barriers and enablers to parental engagement.<sup>4</sup>

The review is separated into three main sections. The first concerns the definition and identification of 'hard to reach' in an outreach context. The next two gather together themes from the literature under two main headings, barriers and enablers.

### 3.2 Defining 'hard to reach' parents and families

#### 3.2.1 Defining 'hard to reach'

From an educational perspective, Campbell (2011: 10) defined hard to reach parents 'as those who have very low levels of engagement with school; do not attend school meetings nor respond to communications; exhibit high levels of inertia in overcoming perceived barriers to participation'. However, the term *hard to reach* can be problematic to define (Evangelou et al., 2013; Campbell 2011), and it has been suggested that there are in fact 'degrees of "hard-to-reach"-ness' (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012: 211).

In addition, the term 'hard-to-reach' itself can be perceived as a stigma, especially for males (Neale and Davies 2015); whereas some definitions and terminology have been criticised for implying that it is the parent or family that is hard to reach (Wilson 2020), rather than a service or organisation being hard for that family to reach. For example, young fathers are often identified as a 'hard to reach' group with complex support needs; but as Davies (2016) suggests, 'rather than seeing young fathers as "hard to reach", services need to acknowledge that rather than being a failure of this client group to engage with services, it is often a failure of the service to put in place effective engagement strategies that leads to their lack of uptake' (2016: 328). Consequently, Asmussen et

---

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this literature review, the term 'parental engagement' has been used broadly to refer to familial and non-familial carers.

al. note that parents defined as hard to reach 'are frequently confronting multiple problems that are likely to affect their inter-parental relationship and their ability to parent effectively.' (Asmussen et al. 2017: 6); and Boag-Munroe and Evangelou believe that the term *hard to reach* can 'disguise the complexities of the lives of these families and the factors which lead to their disengagement' (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, 2012: 209).

### 3.2.2 Defining parental engagement

It is widely acknowledged that parental engagement with their children's learning can impact on educational attainment (Watt, 2016; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Goodall, 2013; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), along with increasing the child's self-esteem and motivation to learn (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Although the concept of parental engagement is one which is generally 'viewed positively', the term can be interpreted in different ways (Day 2013: 40). For example, parental engagement can be understood in a narrow sense of parents being involved in their children's schooling, or a much broader sense of parents engaging with their children's learning (Goodall, 2013). Watt (2016) distinguishes between parental **engagement** and parental **involvement**. For Watt, parental engagement indicates a direct engagement with the child's learning, in contrast with parental involvement in specific school activities. Similarly, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) proposed a continuum from parental involvement with the school (which is school directed) to parental engagement with children's learning; as the parental agency increases along the continuum, the school agency decreases, and ultimately, the responsibility is shared between parents and schools, with both working together.

This distinction allows outreach to understand parental interaction in more nuanced terms that may better take into account the individual context of the family. Along similar lines, Asmussen et al. (2017: 8) divide 'effective parenting' into three areas of potential issues: parent (personal characteristics and wellbeing), child (characteristics and development), and wider contexts (inter-parental relationship, social support networks, economic circumstances). This supports previous work by Goodell and Vorhaus which suggests that evidence from the literature 'confirms the importance of a parental needs analysis, along with understanding what parents already do with their children and how they are most likely to respond positively to attempts to engage them (further) in their children's learning.' (Goodell and Vorhaus 2010, p.7)

### 3.2.3 Wider indicators

Some literature makes a connection between the engagement of parents in localised interventions (which is harder to track) and wider indicators of disadvantage. Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, (2012) record from their literature review on the subject a range of contexts which may have a direct or indirect effect on parental engagement, which they summarise as ‘involuntary isolation’ (a wide-ranging heading including factors which limit a parent’s capacity or ability to engage), health issues and lack of skills or qualifications.

This would suggest that areas of hard-to-reach parents are identifiable through demographic analysis. According to the Department for Work and Pensions (2020), nine indicators are used to track national progress in relation to addressing the disadvantages that affect families and children:

- Parental Worklessness;
- Parental Conflict;
- Poor Parental Mental Health;
- Parental Drug and Alcohol Dependency;
- Problem Debt;
- Homelessness;
- Early Years Development;
- Educational Attainment;
- Youth Employment.

Schoon et al. (2012:2) reported that parental worklessness was significantly associated with: ‘poorer academic attainment and behavioural adjustment of young children (at age 7); poorer academic attainment (GCSE point scores) of young people (at Key Stage 4 (KS4)); with being not in education, employment and training (NEET) and with being NEET for longer (months spent in NEET) in late adolescence.’ The Department for Work and Pensions reported in 2017 that one in eight children live in workless families. Families experiencing worklessness were reported to often be ‘held back by disadvantages such as problem debt, drug and alcohol dependency, and by homelessness.’ In addition, many workless families ‘suffer from parental conflict and poor mental health which can have a long-term impact on children’s development’. (7) As a result, the report argued that ‘Children growing up in workless families are almost twice as likely as children in working families to fail at all stages of their education’ (Department for Work and Pensions, 2017: 8).

If this is the case, then it is notable that between October and December 2019, 9% of all children were living in workless households<sup>5</sup> in the UK (approx. 1.2 million children) (Labour Force Survey October to December 2019, quoted in Department for Work and Pensions, 2020). Also, 8% of all children had been living in workless households for at least 12 months in 2018, which is around 1 million children (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020).

### **3.2.4 Being cautious with wider indicators**

However, the narrative that parental problems affect educational aspirations has been challenged by several researchers. For example, Sime and Sheridan's study (2014) of a deprived area of Scotland found that while parents had 'limited volume of capital they could draw upon, mainly because of their low qualifications, poor employment and reduced social networks outside their local area' (2014: 339), they were still seeking the best opportunities for their children and had high expectations: 'They valued and saw education as key to enabling their children to move beyond their present circumstances' (2014: 333). Similarly, Watt's study (2016) also noted that parents from lower socio-economic status did not have lower aspirations for their children. While noting the impact of worklessness on young people's development, Schoon et al.'s study also suggested that 'fostering good engagement with school is potentially one route to minimise the effects of parental worklessness on children and young people.' (2012: 44)

Donnelly et al. (2020: 114) studied the involvement of mothers of low socioeconomic status in health education activities and reported the following barriers: 'personal circumstances, child influence, issues with events, issues with the Parent Council, and a disconnect between the school and the parents'. In these cases, while personal circumstances included additional commitments, child-related activities and employment, along with a lack of time and being a single parent, this did not necessarily affect parental aspirations. Instead, it was noted that aspects such as the timing of events (e.g. not being able to attend events during the day due to their work schedules), lack of confidence to get involved, and a lack of a sense of partnership with the school also constituted key barriers. Similarly, Whitmarsh's (2010) study of mothers who were asylum-seekers and their experiences of accessing early years education. All of the mothers were educated to secondary level, with two having studied at university – as noted by the author, the mothers were 'far from the stereotypical young, uneducated, illiterate, criminal, asylum-seeker portrayed in the media'

---

<sup>5</sup> This is defined as a household where nobody over the age of 16 is in employment.

(Whitmarsh, 2010: 547). Although the mothers actively engaged in their children's learning, they described 'tensions in language learning, a lack of appropriate cultural resources, perceptions of teachers as experts, and differing values as desired attributes for their children' (535), all of which are potential barriers to engagement.

### **3.3 Barriers to parental engagement**

#### **3.3.1 Practical or logistical barriers**

While wide indicators may well affect engagement levels, this is clearly not the entire story. Given that, as we have argued in our previous reports,<sup>6</sup> decision-making and engagement in decision-making support for young people can be understood as gated assets, a further area to examine are the practical and logistical issues which can pose a fundamental barrier (or 'gate') to parental engagement. This includes aspects such as the cost, time needed, and transport required (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011), as well as location and opening times (Flanagan & Hancock 2010) of activities or interventions. Day (2013) notes that general practical barriers to engagement may include conflict with parent's working patterns, the availability and cost of public transport, child care needs and whether parents have children at different schools.

#### **3.3.2 Perceived barriers**

In one study, many of the participants reported a perceived 'barrier' between schools and parents. This barrier was particularly significant for parents who 'are poorly educated and have a negative experience at school'. Barriers can result in parents 'feeling alienated from, and even afraid of, the education system meaning they are reluctant to get involved in their children's school life' (Watt, 2016: 37). The view that parents feeling isolated or lonely, or having fears and perceptions of barriers between schools and parents has also been put forward by Day (2013).

Informing such barriers can be previous negative experiences of accessing services (Flanagan & Hancock 2010) or a previous negative experiences of school (Campbell 2011). In some cases, as with Sime and Sheridan's work (2014), parents' lack of experience with education contributed to a

---

<sup>6</sup> See Grimwood, Goodwin and Gabrovraz (2020). *Voluntary and Community Organisations in Cumbria: Assets for Young People's Decision-Making?* Commissioned by Hello Future.



reluctance to engage. In others, negative perceptions of hard to reach parents coloured some aspects of service delivery (Flanagan & Hancock 2010) leading to poor experiences for all.

These perceptions are important when one considers that in many cases the home-school partnerships has been conceived as ‘consumer’ relationships (see, for example, Bojuwoye 2009). But this model assumes a certain activity on behalf of ‘the consumer’ which may not be true of all parents; neither is the model of the consumer in this relationship obvious. For parents with low self-esteem (Campbell 2011), anxieties or general wariness (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012), these can all lead to disengagement.

### **3.3.3 Organisational barriers**

Organisational barriers were identified for hard to reach families accessing services in Boag-Munroe and Evangelou’s literature review (2012), including:

- Communication (including culture, language, literacy, no access to phones, hearing impairment, services use jargon, difficulty in accessing information about the service, difficulty in asking for help, lack of common understandings across practitioners, service not listening).
- Setting (e.g. lack of visibility within the community, service too specialised, lack of activities which include parents, timing of activities, long waiting lists, unwelcoming settings, inappropriate venue, cleanliness of venue, service seen as cliquey, stigma of being associated with setting, lack of effort by services).
- Lack of consistency, lack of resources, poor quality of service, lack of infrastructure to do outreach work, high staff turnover, programme location, and allowing families to slip through the net.

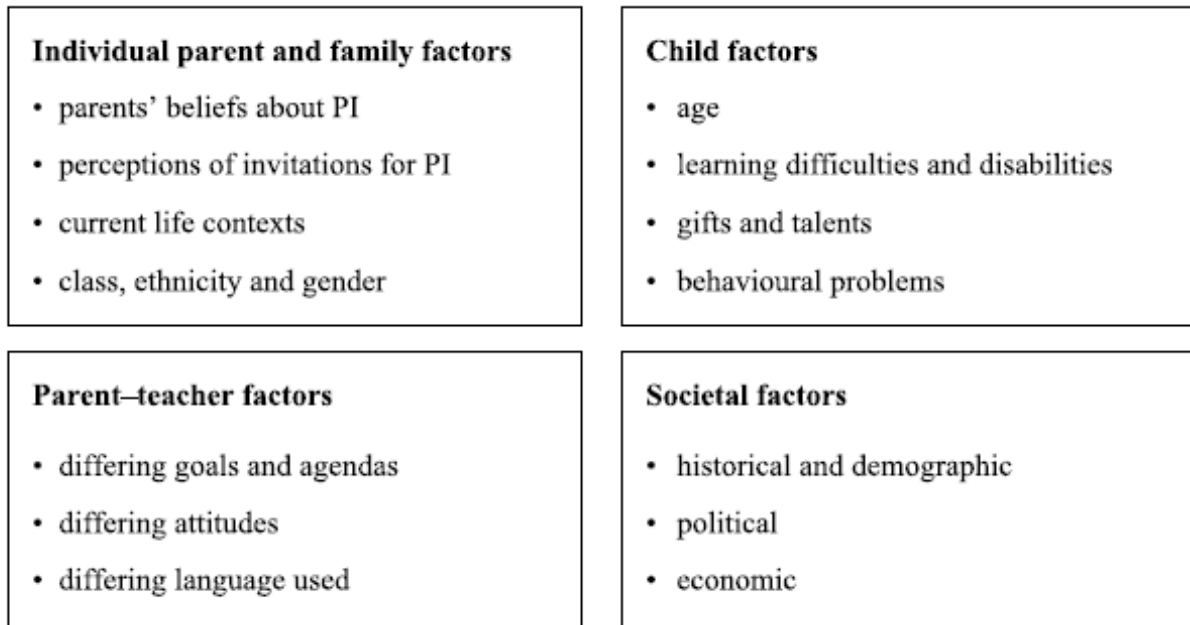
In other cases, organisational assumptions were held up as barriers. For example, Goodall (2019) points out the gendered presumptions about parenting as most of the discussion and research tends to focus on mothers, as they are the often the primary caregivers (see also Campbell 2011).

Goodall (2019) also noted the prominence of a ‘deficit model’ of parenting whereby parental engagement is based on an ‘individualised view of differences in children’s outcomes and behaviour, traced back to how parents parent’ (2019: 7). In Goodall’s words, one of the most pervasive parts of the myth of this model is ‘that poor parents (e.g. parenting experiencing

poverty) are also poor parents (e.g. parents who do not come up to expected norms of parenting)' (Goodall, 2019: 7).

### 3.3.4 Holistic barrier models

Hornby and Lafaele (2011: 39) created a model of the potential barriers for parental involvement in education:



This model was reviewed in a later study in 2018, with 'child factors' being replaced with 'practical barriers' including time restraints, parents not sure about approaching staff, no access to internet and so on (Hornby & Blackwell 2018). La Placa and Corlyon (2014) meanwhile categorised barriers to successful engagement of parents in mainstream preventive services as threefold:

- structural barriers (e.g. access to information, the cost and availability of public transport, geographic location of services, physical barriers);
- social and cultural barriers (e.g. poverty, ethnicity, gendered services which fail to engage fathers); and
- suspicion and stigma associated with engaging with services.

## 3.4 Enablers to parental engagement

As the above summaries suggest, there is no single approach for either identifying, or dealing with, low engagement from parents and carers. However, research has highlighted some good examples of successful interventions which address the barriers identified above.

### **3.4.1 Educating and supporting parents/families**

In some cases, reaching out to parents and seeking feedback on how engagement could be improved led to significantly more uptake. For example, Day (2013) notes in their study how parents suggested that their engagement could be enhanced through fun interactions with other parents and children, along with activities or workshops in school, which promote learning together.

Likewise, Watt (2016) found that encouraging parental involvement and engagement by teaching parents how to teach their children so that they were equipped to do this at home, and providing opportunities to educate the parents in order to increase their aspirations, was a useful strategy. Direct help from school to support a child's learning, sensitive to the contexts of the household, with a broad definition of 'engagement', has often appeared in the literature as a positive step (see Sime and Sheddan 2014, Goodall & Vorhause 2011).

The ethos of such activities is important. For example, Donnelly et al. studied the involvement of mothers of low socioeconomic status in health education activities, finding that 'the data suggest that schools could focus more on nurturing these parents' beliefs that their involvement in school-based health activities could make a worthwhile contribution to their own and their child's well-being.' (Donnelly et al. 2020: 120)

### **3.4.2 Building positive relationships**

Flanagan & Hancock's work (2010) noted the importance of individual relationships in service delivery: somewhat understandably, voluntary and community sector services need staff who are welcoming, trustworthy and treat clients with respect are more successful at achieving long-term success. As such, engagement can be enhanced by developing 'constructive relationships, communication and partnership with schools' (Day 2013: 49).

Some of the literature promotes the idea of regular communication and keeping parents informed of their children's education and progress (Watt 2016), while others notes that while

communication is key, so is flexibility and adaptability throughout delivery (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012). As such, a variety of communication methods can be beneficial, such as discussion groups, newsletters, homework diaries, social media, text messages and so on (Donnelly et al. 2020). This is particularly important bearing in mind the practical and logistical barriers to engagement mentioned above. For example, Watt (2016) discuss the benefits of partnership working and inviting parents into the school; but as other literature points out, this can create unintentionally gated assets if parents do not have the capacity to attend.

The emphasis on building positive relationships was taken a step further in a pilot programme aimed at engaging hard to reach families within the white British community of an inner-London borough, where community-based link workers were recruited to bridge home and school (Fretwell et al., 2018). The evaluation of this work noted that fostering trust is important for engaging the parents and as the link workers were perceived as belonging to the same community, this helped to build empathy with the hard to reach families.

### 3.4.3 Effective initiatives

The literature suggests a number of specific initiatives which have been documented to be successful within their contexts. These include:

- Wilson's (2020) study of hard to reach parents living in communities experiencing poverty explored the use of gatekeepers in the community as an effective tool for engaging hard to reach groups in research. The study found that **informal gatekeepers** who belonged to the community were more successful in engaging hard to reach families because they 'had a strong in-group salience to the participants'. The **formal gatekeepers** were less successful because they were 'perceived as out-group members' (2020: 470), thus reaffirming some of the perceived barriers mentioned above in 3.3.2.
- McLeish et al.'s (2016) literature review identified three types of volunteering with parents aimed at improving early childhood outcomes: **community champions**, **volunteers leading groups** or **volunteer providing one-to-one support**. It was reported that 'Volunteers can initiate a different kind of relationship with parents based on trust and equality, and can reach and be accepted by parents who do not engage with professional services' (2016: 11)
- Reflecting this, Donnelly et al. (2020) found that the role of **parent champions** for activities can be beneficial. Involving parents in joint parent-child activities, school trips, and home-

based activities were seen as positive ways to increase their involvement, so long as the contexts of the home life were understood by the school.

- Fletcher et al. (2013) evaluated a **family support programme**, which involves service user leadership, and is flexibly designed to engage young parents. The findings showed that the young families valued having the opportunity to learn craft-based activities with their children, to improve relationships, learn about infant massage, and to learn about parenting from a culturally and racially diverse group.
- Similarly, but in a more specialised context, McEwan et al. (2015) demonstrated how a **parental training programme** for preschool attention-deficit/hyper-activity disorder (ADHD) could be adapted to overcome some of the barriers typically experienced by hard to reach families. For example, the programme adaptations included increasing the programme length to allow families to access information if they missed sessions, and introducing modules for children (e.g. sleep problems, sensory issues, speech and language difficulties) and modules for adults (e.g. parental ADHD, learning difficulties and literacy).

### 3.5 Summary

It should be noted that the list of effective initiatives does not always address the barriers raised in section 3.3. For example, the use of volunteers in parental activities may well merely reproduce the imbalance of engagement already in place (i.e. those parents with time to engage will also volunteer). Likewise, parental training programmes may not, at face value, address the problem of previously negative experiences of education.

The overall message of these examples of enablers, however, is that improving parental engagement takes time. As Watt notes, it takes significant effort to implement strategies to engage hard to reach parents and families (Watt, 2016), because ‘complex issues need complex solutions which in turn need time to implement.’ (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, 2012: 209) With this in mind, the following is a summary of the key points to emerge from the diverse literature on the subject:

- The category of ‘hard-to-reach’ is variable and can, in itself, reflect assumptions made by organisations and service providers. Providers need to be wary of adopting ‘deficit models’ in their understanding of what assets parents and carers potentially provide.

- Implementing strategies for parental engagement works best when it is based on evidence-supported needs.
- There is, in Hornby and Blackwell's words, a 'spectrum' of parental involvement from 'attendance at traditional events at the school (e.g. parents' evenings or sports day), to active involvement in the child's schooling (e.g. supporting homework), and to higher-level parental engagement with the child's learning (e.g. ongoing moral support) and acknowledgement of the parent's own educational needs (e.g. attending parenting classes).' (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018: 117) Awareness of the reach of this spectrum is key to understanding how needs might be addressed.
- Engagement is not always about the individual parent's willingness to be involved. Organisations need to ensure they provide accessible information and services, with flexibility of delivery where possible. As La Placa and Corlyon note, 'appropriate and sensitive' provision underlies successful engagement strategies.

## 4. Findings: Parent and Carer Surveys

### 4.1 Parent and carer experiences of education

The variation in definitions of ‘hard-to-reach’ parents in terms of engagement with outreach and young people’s decision-making assets was highlighted in the Hello Future parent and carer survey. For example, the findings from the phase one survey highlighted that:

On average, 44% of parents and carers in Cumbria studied higher level qualifications after school. Parents and carers in Barrow-in-Furness (51%) and West Cumbria (50%) are more likely to have done so than parents and carers in Carlisle (25%).

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 6)

As shown in Figure 1, the findings from the second phase of the survey indicated that 40% of the parents and carers were educated to degree level or above, 24% had A-levels/NVQ level 3 and 35% had GCSEs/NVQ level 2:

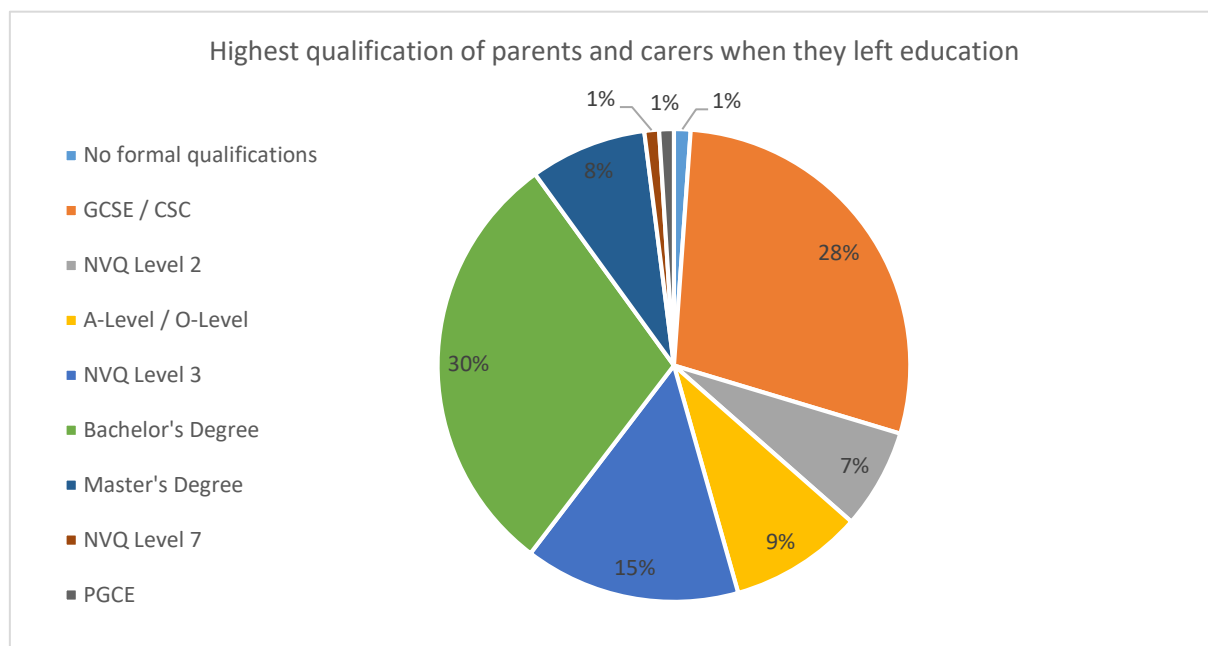


Figure 1: Highest qualification of parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020)

Furthermore, phase two of the survey reported variation across the regions of Cumbria:

This method has revealed that while just 25% of parents and carers in Carlisle and Eden did not study at a higher level, we now know 42% did not study past GCSE level or equivalent – a higher proportion than Furness or West Cumbria, where it is almost the reverse story.

For example, more than 40% of parents and carers in both Furness (41%) and West Cumbria (43%) have an undergraduate degree. It should not be assumed that all parents and carers in Carlisle and Eden are not educated beyond GCSE level however, as 11% have a Master's Degree.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 7)

It appears that some of the parents and carers have returned to study later in life:

Parents and carers often express regret at not studying further or for longer. As a result, some have studied again more recently or have completed an academic or professional qualification later in life. All appear to recognise the role FE/HE could play in helping their child/children progress academically and professionally in life.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 6)

For example, in the phase two survey, 51% of the respondents indicated that they had returned to formal education later in life (based on raw data from the Parent and Carer Survey, 2020).

However, it was noted:

On average, 68% of students across Cumbria will be the first in the family to either go to college or university.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 8)



This presents some challenges to the more generalised view of hard-to-reach parents presented in much of the literature covered in section 3, and testifies to the (in some case extreme) diversity of populations across the region in terms of economic activity and educational attainment. This resonates with the findings of the literature review that targeted approaches to specific needs may well provide a more detailed understanding of the specific barriers to engagement. If interventions should be needs-based, then determining whether these needs revolve around wider indicators (section 3.2.3) or (and not necessarily unrelated) practical and logistical barriers (section 3.3.1) is key to making sense of the survey responses, which suggest both that parents in some parts of the area have higher educational qualifications, *but* that overall young people are more often than not the first member of the family to attend higher education.

## 4.2 Parent and carer levels of confidence about supporting their children

The findings from both surveys suggest that the majority of parents and carers feel confident about discussing future opportunities with their children:

78% of parents and carers across Cumbria feel that they are either quite or very aware of the opportunities after school or college for their child/children...  
...Once again, 78% of parents and carers feel confident in discussing the available opportunities with their child/children.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 8)

On average, 91% of parents and carers across Cumbria have had a conversation with their child/children about Higher Education and future opportunities.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 18)

However, the survey data indicates that confidence levels can vary depending on the qualification being discussed and the parent or carer's educational background:

Parents and carers in West Cumbria again appear more confident advising their children of opportunities at university, such as bachelors and master's degrees (53%) compared those in Carlisle and Eden (40%) and Furness (33%). This theme is again consistent across A-Levels, while all parents and carers appear confident in discussing GCSEs with their children.

There continues to be limited understanding of higher or degree apprenticeships from parents and carers in Cumbria as well as apprenticeships...

...Confidence in discussing BTECs and technical and professional qualifications remains low, regardless of parent and carer educational background.

There is also a continued gap in confidence in discussing university options depending on educational background.

64% of parents and carers who went to HE feel confident in discussing in university options compared to just 19% of parents and carers who did not attend HE, suggesting educational background is a significant factor in higher education being discussed in households.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 10-11)

What are the barriers to having a conversation?

- Uncertainty around the situation causes stress
- Not sure what to do next
- Too young to have that conversation
- Difficult to understand the process
- We don't understand the transition between school and HE
- Not enough detailed information or specifics

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 14)

In particular, the parents and carers appear to be more confident when discussing career options that align with their own experience:

It appears parents and carers are more comfortable speaking to their child/children about experiences that align closely with their own. For example, we know that 75% of parents and carers in Carlisle did not go to FE/HE and are more confident in discussing employment than they are university.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 11)

Although not quite statistically significant, 75% of parents and carers who went to university or higher education themselves, feel confident in their knowledge of this area, compared to just 26% of parents and carers who did not gain this level of education.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 12)

These findings would seem to correlate with some of the perceived barriers raised in section 3.3.2, whereby previous experiences of education can affect the level of engagement. In particular, when considered in relation to wider literature, it could be speculated that parental (and organisational) assumptions about who higher education is 'for', the language used to convey initiatives and the means of communication may well be factors in levels of confidence amongst the surveyed parents.

### **4.3 Parent and carer perceptions of barriers to supporting their children through education**

The parents and carers reported a range of barriers to having a conversation with their children about their plans when they finish school or college:

Some of the biggest barriers to conversations or further discussions in households include a worry from parents and carers that they do not possess the required knowledge needed to adequately advise their child/children.

Parents and carers also have concerns around their child/children lacking confidence and feel this could be improved with additional opportunities for all ages.

There is also a desire to improve general parent and carer awareness around careers, pathways and the transition between school, college and careers or apprenticeships and Higher Education.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 18)

As with the reviewed literature, themes of self-esteem and confidence are prominent here, linked to perception of what knowledge and information a parent may or may not have (this, of course, works both ways: a parent may perceive they have more information about HE and thus be more confident, even though the information may be out of date or limited).

What makes it difficult when trying to support your child?

- Perceived lack of information outside of A-Levels.
- Helping their child/children understand how today's choices could impact their future.
- Being sensitive to their child/children's own ideas about their future and not wanting to encroach.
- Whether immediate career opportunities may be better suited to their child/children.
- General FE/HE available information.
- A lack of a central point of information surrounding FE/HE and options and opportunities.
- Understanding future cost implications – including travel and living costs in FE/HE.
- Communicating with their child/children as well as speaking with the school/college.
- The importance of their immediate effort and work.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 17)

## 4.4 Discussions with children about future plans

For the 91% of parents and carers who had discussed future options with their children, the following topics were explored:

What did you discuss?

- University or apprenticeship
- Possible career options
- Requirements for desired career
- Which subjects support their career choices
- Where and how we can find out more
- Where to visit

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 13)

Phase one of the survey identified that the resources used by the parents to inform their discussions varied across the different locations and depending on their educational background:

45% of parents and carers (overall) who went to HE believe they have gained most of their information from their own personal experience, compared to 35% of parents and carers who didn't study at HE level.

53% of parents and carers in Barrow-in-Furness who did not go on to study at FE/HE said that personal experiences guided their information around further educational opportunities.

Parents and carers in Carlisle appear to adopt a more rounded approach when it comes to gathering information on FE/HE with school (21%) and college (21%) as well as experiences of friends and family (21%) contributing to their existing knowledge.

Parents and carers in West Cumbria are consistently the most likely group to feel confident in their knowledge and awareness of future options and therefore confident in discussing them with their child/children. This group leans heavily on friends and family for information (50%), and are the most likely parents and carers to turn to internet searches for further information (29%).

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 14)

The emphasis on personal experience as a source of information, combined with the responses to the previous questions suggesting lack of information beyond the immediate education young

people are undertaking, echoes the literature review’s findings on the importance of ongoing and flexible communication, which may render parents ‘hard-to-reach’ through no intent of their own.

As shown in Figure 2, during the second phase of the survey, online resources were identified as the most common resource used by parents and carers, followed by information provided by the school and the child:

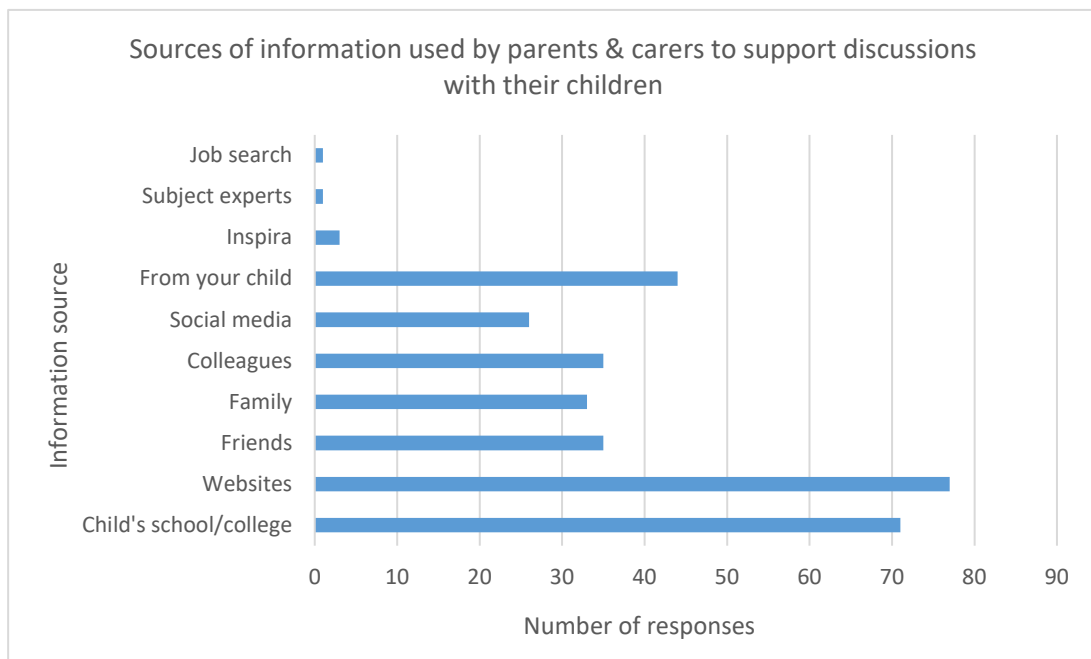


Figure 2: Sources of information used by parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020)

Since Phase One, online resources appear to have become a prominent source of information when it comes to secondary and higher education, as well as career and employment advice, while advice from friends and family plays a decreasing role.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 17)

Figure 3 illustrates that across most qualification groups, the parents and carers utilise similar resources, particularly websites and information provided by the child’s school/college or by the child. This suggests that educational qualifications of parents may have less of a bearing on how information is sought and interpreted.

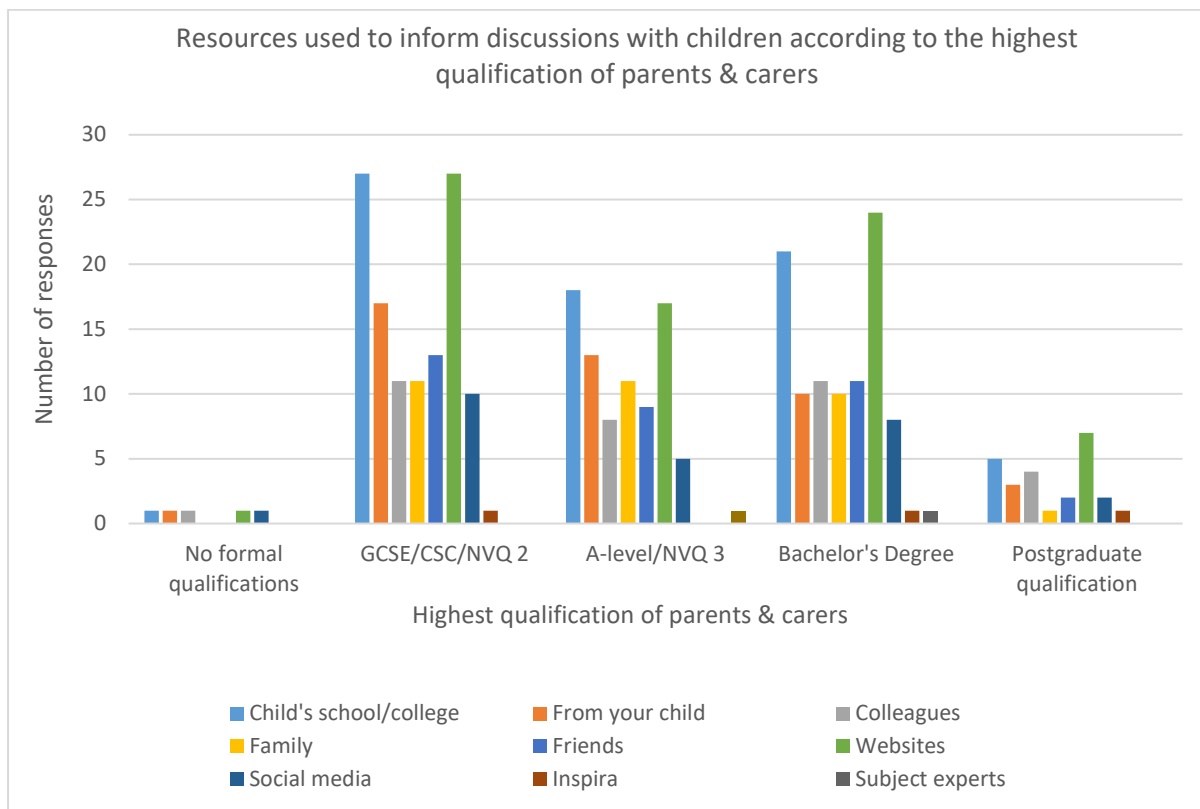


Figure 3: Resources used to inform discussions according to the highest qualification of parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020)

#### 4.5 Resources that would enable parents to further support for their children

Both phases of the survey highlighted the need for parents and carers to have access to additional information to enable them to better support their children with making decisions about their education and career pathways:

There is a consistent theme across Cumbria, where parents and carers want additional information provided to them and their child/children. This includes information being disseminated to child/children around FE, HE, apprenticeship and employment options available - locally and nationally. Parents and carers are also keen on being kept up-to-date on emerging opportunities and changes to the FE/HE process.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 20)

In particular, it was evident that parents and carers would appreciate having a guide that clearly explains the career and education routes available to their children:

When it comes to interventions, all parents and carers across Cumbria would favour a guide to explain future options to their child/children over any other intervention.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 22)

Phase two also identified variation in the types of additional support preferred by parents and carers across different parts of Cumbria:

Once again, a tailored approach dependent on each area could be the most beneficial approach to parents and carers across Cumbria. For example, access to one-to-one support appears to be more popular in West Cumbria (63%) than in Carlisle and Eden (42%) and Furness (48%). In contrast, parents and carers in Carlisle and Eden are more likely to prefer the opportunity to attend college (72%) and university (64%) open days. Parents and carers in Furness have a slightly more balanced approach with a guide (85%), online resources (56%) and university open days (63%) the most popular options.

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 19)



This reflects the theme raised in the literature review regarding both the need for awareness of contextual need and flexibility of provision of service; as Evangelou (2013) concerns, providing support needs to be in the right location, space and time.

Figure 4 illustrates that the parents would like to have access to a range of resources when supporting their children throughout their education. The majority of parents and carers across all qualification groups would particularly value a guide that explains the various education routes available to their children, along with the opportunity to attend college and university open days, and a careers fair attended by employers:

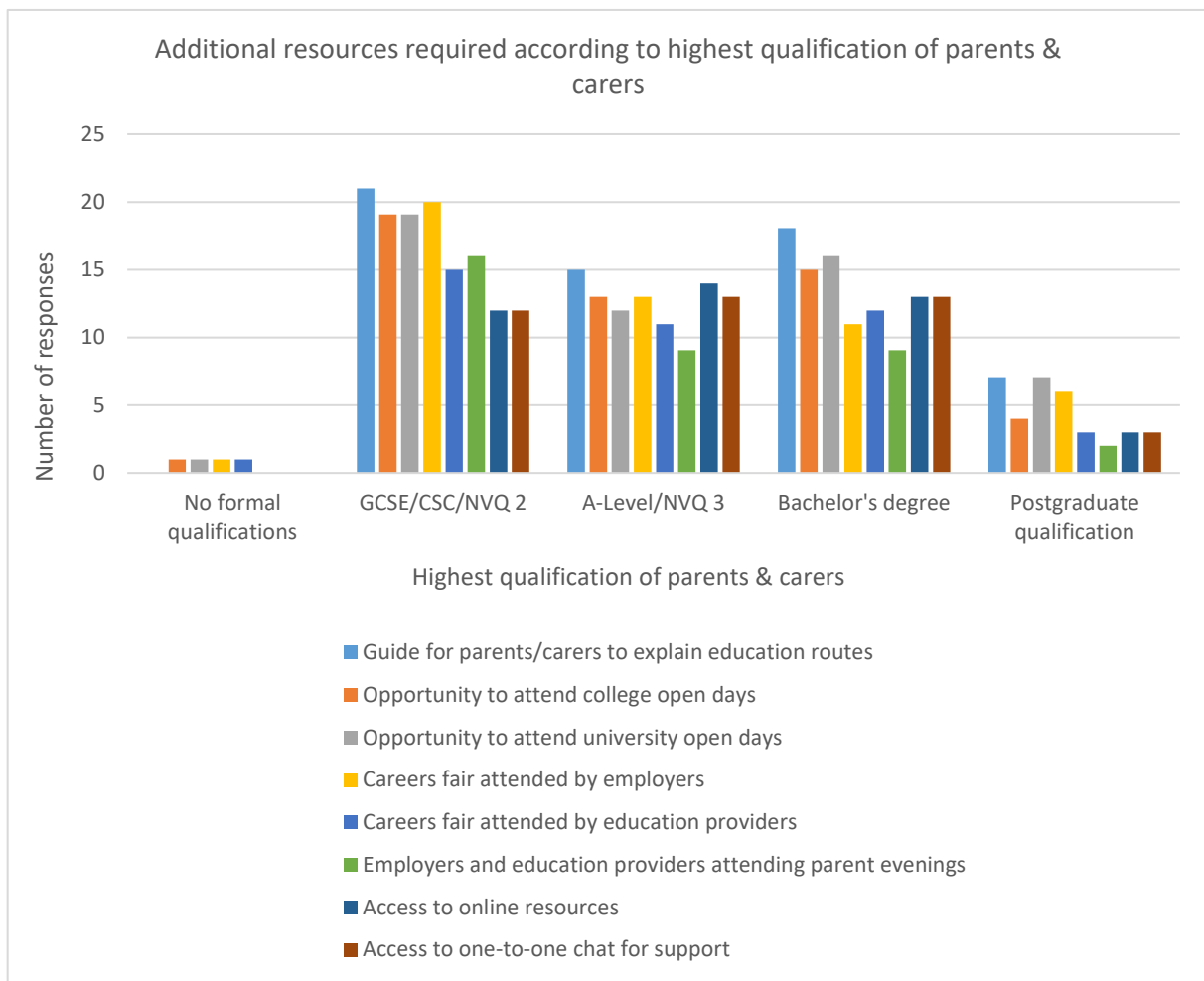


Figure 4: Additional resources required according to the highest qualification of parents/carers (raw data from Parent & Carer Survey, 2020)

## 5. Findings: interviews with ‘hard to reach’ parents

### 5.1 Participant demographics

Six parents completed the email interviews. As shown in Table 1, the parents were from Carlisle and Eden (4 participants), and Barrow (2 participants). No participants were recruited from West Cumbria. The participants had children in school years 9, 11 and 13.

	Area of Cumbria	Child’s year group
Participant 1	Carlisle & Eden	Year 11
Participant 2	Barrow	Year 9
Participant 3	Carlisle & Eden	Year 9
Participant 4	Carlisle & Eden	Years 11 & 13
Participant 5	Carlisle & Eden	Year 9
Participant 6	Barrow	Year 13

Table 1: Location of participants and their child’s year group

### 5.2 Discussions with children about their future

All of the participants indicated that they had discussed the future with their children, specifically decisions relating to college and sixth form, A-levels, university and employment, along with career and personal aspirations.

Participant 4 had discussed future plans with both children in years 11 and 13, and was very supportive of their decisions:

“I have talked a lot to both of my daughters about the future and what they want to do next. I have supported [child in year 13] with her decision to go to university and we have discussed different university options and different courses and we have talked things through, but the decision has been left to [child] to decide which university and which course. I am proud of her as I feel that she has thought things

through, considered over time and made the decision she feels is best and I support this. I have talked to [child in year 11] about her next step options, sixth form [at current school] or another school or college, and she has decided that she wants to stay at [current] school and do her A levels in their sixth form. We have talked through subject options and she has decided what she thinks best, but knows she can change her mind nearer the time. She has expressed a wish to go into nursing so is looking at subjects which will lead to this. They have both been open to my views while having views of their own and have listened and considered before making their choices which so far, I can see their logic in and support.” (Participant 4)

Participant 6 had discussed personal and career aspirations with their child, who was in year 13:

“...we have discussed jobs, degree options and other plans such as travelling, the desire to/not to have children. I feel my discussion with my 17 yr old daughter is two way, honest, reflective but vague... [child] wants to go to uni, study philosophy and criminology, and beyond that she is not sure. She doesn't know if she wants to meet someone, or have children, what sort of career or work she might do. She would like to travel but she is not sure where, how long for or if she would have the confidence to do so.” (Participant 6)

Participant 3's child was in year 9 and already had a career in mind, but was concerned about not achieving the necessary GCSE grades due to the impact of COVID-19:

“Yes, we have discussed this, and she wants to be a teacher. She advises me that there are topics that she really is struggling with which she needs to complete for the GCSEs. Yet the ones that she is thriving at, she must pick one of those and she thinks it is unfair. She states that she wants to do her best and achieve the best grades to give her a better platform for choosing her A-levels. However, in this currently climate she is worried she might not get the grades and is anxious. I asked if repeating a year would be optional and she said she

would not want to do that, so she is adding a bit more stress onto herself.” (Participant 3)

Two of the participants explained that they supported their children – who were in years 11 and 9 – with their plans to attend college:

“Yes we have spoken about what she wants to do in the future. She wants to go to college & I am happy with her decision as she isn’t very academic so I feel that to gain a “trade” is the best way for her to go.” (Participant 1)

“She has thought about going to college but isn't sure which one yet. She's thinking about staying close to home. I am fine with whatever she would like to do and want to support her with that decision.” (Participant 2)

Another parent encouraged their year 9 child to be realistic and open-minded about their future opportunities:

“My daughter is never keen to discuss her future, she doesn't have a particular dream job. She enjoys the arts, drama and musical theatre, and I perhaps feel I'm too realistic at times by telling her what a tricky industry it would be to succeed in, that said I support her in her love for it as a hobby, just perhaps not enthusiastic for it as a career choice.... I think I really just encourage them to not rule anything out and be open minded to the choices ahead.” (Participant 5)

### **5.3 Factors influencing parental support**

Most of the parents felt that their own experience of education or work had influenced how they supported their children with their schooling and decision-making about the future. For example, one parent encouraged their children to succeed at school due to personal experience of re-sitting GCSE exams:

“I didn’t get the grades in my GCSEs so I stayed on at school for an extra year to re-sit them. I then went on to college because I didn’t want to do A levels. I have always encouraged the children to stick in at school so they get their qualifications the first time that they try. I have encouraged the children to get a part time job as well as studying. When I was at college I was there 5 days a week, at least 9-4. I also worked 20 hours a week in a factory on an evening after college.” (Participant 1)

Another parent expressed regret about not studying at degree level, which influenced them to encourage their child to study beyond GCSE level:

“I didn’t attend education past GCSEs, however I have studied in every single employment since to gain qualifications. I would encourage my children to continue to a level or some form of broader education which would widen their possible futures. I now regret bitterly not having a degree as it has limited the employment paths I have and I would never now be in a position to gain this. I would never want this regret to be in my children's way to achieve.” (Participant 5)

Participant 4’s approach to supporting their child with decision-making had been heavily influenced by their own experience as a young person:

“I did well in my own GCSE’s and stayed on at sixth form to do A levels. I had wanted to go to college and started there initially but because I couldn’t do my subject choices I went back to sixth form in the first few weeks to do my A levels there. This was very much influenced by my father who believed it was best for me and I understand his thinking looking back but at the time I was very unhappy in sixth form and resented his insistence. I vowed to let my daughters make their own choices because of this as I feel they will do better when following their own choices and wishes.” (Participant 4)

Four of the parents had attended higher education: two had degree qualifications (Participants 4 and 6), and two had studied at Master's level (Participants 2 and 3). Participants 3 and 4 explained that they had returned to education as mature students whilst also raising their families and working.

Participant 4 felt that their experience of returning to study as a mature student, and parent, had motivated their children to work hard to achieve an education:

“I did not go to university after sixth form as I had had enough of schooling at that point but I did return to education as a young adult (and mother) when my girls were 3 & 5 years old and I completed a degree in social work. I qualified in 2012 and have been working as a fostering social worker since 2013. I think me going to university and getting a higher paid job which has resulted in a bigger house and nice holidays has influenced my daughters with their desire to work hard and do well, and they both have aspirations of getting a degree and well paid job which they enjoy.” (Participant 4)

Similarly, Participant 3 commented:

“I think my life experiences have been influential for my daughter. With regards to jobs, she has seen that I have struggled with jobs and career and I have wanted to do my best by them, but also myself to provide a stable environment. Nevertheless, at the same time she has also seen me juggle life to get an education, I had to study, work placements, juggle family life to enable me to complete my degree and masters. This has made her more determined to try and get the most out of her education at a younger age. (Participant 3)

Another parent emphasised that their child had an awareness of how education and work experience can potentially impact on an individual's life:

“She realizes the importance of working hard but certain jobs require proper training or a degree to do. I have a Master's Degree but haven't started my career field yet because family situations have put my

career on hold, but we are hopeful. She also is aware of the backup experience I have in support and social care. She's also aware how her grandparents didn't go to college and how it affected them.”  
(Participant 2)

One of the parents had recently been diagnosed with a specific learning disability [SpLD], which had impacted significantly on their own experience of postgraduate education and also, their approach to supporting their child's learning:

“...I have only just been diagnosed with a SpLD and that was in my final year of my Masters. I struggle with an array of things and thought I was really thick as it takes me different techniques to learn than others which I have passed on different ways of learning that has been beneficial for myself. I still find education very daunting and helping with homework. However, she is very patient and has a good understanding [about] others taking slightly longer than herself.”  
(Participant 3)

In addition, another parent explained how their own upbringing and life experience had influenced them to encourage their children to work hard at something they enjoy, rather than focussing on income or materialism:

“I am degree educated and grew up in a middle class family with a mum from a working class council estate in east end London and a dad from an upper middle class, privately educated background. He went to Oxford and did an MA and she left school at 15, then later on qualified as a nurse and then a Teaching Assistant. They are both Christians and my dad is a vicar. The assumption that we would all go to university was very much there, but also with a clear message that if we didn't want to we didn't have to. I think this has influenced me far more than my education and work experience in many ways. I did a degree, and then started a career in which I was progressing but then became a single mum and had to change direction. Since then I have always prioritised family and life over work and career and income, and have tried to influence my children to work hard, do their

best, go and get what they want, but above all don't look to money and material things but to what is right, and will give them satisfaction in their jobs and enjoyment of their life. I try to teach them to be a happy dustbin man who does the best he can leads to a better life than an over worked lawyer who never sees his/her children and may have plenty of money to spend but no time to enjoy his/her life. (Having said that, I would love my children to be 'successful' in a more worldly way, too!)" (Participant 6)

#### **5.4 Difficulties experienced by parents when supporting their children**

The parents reported several difficulties when supporting their children through education, such as educational terminology, the accessibility of resources, the impact of COVID-19 and the support provided by the child's school.

Participant 2 explained that the terminology associated with qualifications and education options can be a barrier for international parents and carers:

"I'm American so I still find that much goes over my head with all the different equivalent things. GCSEs are different for one. I wish there was a course on all these terms for international adults to learn and understand." (Participant 2)

Participant 3, who had recently been diagnosed with a SpLD, highlighted a need for more accessible resources in schools, along with alternative forms of assessments, to meet the various needs of the children and also, their parents:

"I think there needs to be more resources for others such as audio videos, type talk dragon reader, mind mapping... (I also have an understanding that children may think they are thick or uneducated and more needs to be done to help cater to children's abilities, not their disabilities, everyone is unique). That all work should not be marked by exams and essays. That practical work should be done as well as posters and PowerPoints to be considered in pupils' grades.



Not everyone has managed to leave school with the basics and some adults find it intimidating.” (Participant 3)

In addition, Participant 3 stated:

“I do think there are barriers to education such as money, economic status, postcode lottery as to whether you can get the best out of your education... [And] I think there should be more free resources as that is a big barrier for adults trying to support their children.” (Participant 3)

It was evident that COVID-19 had caused some additional difficulties for parents and their children, for example:

“At the moment it is hard because they are doing remote learning. My daughter has a teaching assistant in most of her lessons but at the moment she has quite a lot of “live” lessons so does have the teacher to talk to if she gets stuck on anything.” (Participant 1)

“...it is difficult this past year of my children’s education because of COVID-19... lack of computers, lack of resources or websites and intellectual jargon is also hard for kids to understand too... My daughter is finding it all very daunting, however we support her every step of the way we can only do our best and that is what I have told her. No matter what happens, I am super proud of her and the way she has adapted is just fantastic.” (Participant 3)

“I haven’t found supporting my children difficult, other than the impact of covid at this time which has meant they haven’t been able to have the same experiences as other year groups in visiting university or job fayres/open days and career advice.” (Participant 4)

One participant described how their children had attended separate schools in Barrow and consequently, their experiences of pastoral and academic support differed greatly:

“I find that the aspirations your child’s school puts on your child is not always high enough to inspire them – my daughter went to the school in the neighbouring town whilst my son opted for the school in our town – a school which serves the deprived areas of a poor town, and you could clearly see the difference in their academic expectations. My daughter’s school did not put enough support into pastoral care while my son’s school did not provide academic support to the brightest kids as they focussed on the academically weakest and those with behavioural problems. Both my children are extremely bright but [son] grew up not needing to apply himself and therefore didn’t really know how to in sixth form, while [daughter] is self-sufficient, self-disciplined and conscientious (partly down to gender too, I would imagine) and has done as well as she could have done during COVID...”  
(Participant 6)

Furthermore, Participant 6 expressed concerns about the educational focus on targets and how the sixth form/school communicated with parents:

“Although I think targets can be helpful to inspire a child, I also think the focus on them in schools can be detrimental – an assumption that is what you will get can leave a pupil not bothering to make an effort, or feeling that they are too low or high to want to make you try. I feel that the lack of communication from sixth form to parents despite the fact that they are still children, we (parents) are still getting child benefit for them, they still need help in so many ways, is frustrating and inconsistent... I also think reports focus on the wrong stuff. Throughout school, i.e. from 4 years old, the reports have been filled with things like ‘your child can now right the letter U/has learned trigonometry/needs to develop knowledge of erosion’ etc. No parent is interested in this. What we want to know is are they happy, do they have friends, are they behaving and polite in class, on the corridors etc, are they working to their level of ability, do they give their homework in time, focus in class, treat others kindly, get involved with

other aspects of school life. And also, what will the school, and what can we, do about it if they are not?!” (Participant 6)

## 5.5 Useful resources for supporting decision-making about the future

The parents identified several useful resources for supporting their children with decision-making about the future, including information and support provided by the school, discussions with the careers officer, open days/evenings and careers fairs. It was noted that some of the resources and support had recently been delivered virtually due to the impact of Covid-19. For example:

“My daughter has talked to the careers officer at school & we have looked at attending the college open evening as well as the school 6th form open evening, although both these events are happening virtually now.” (Participant 1)

“I think stem events, visits to universities and support with things like uni applications or college applications is really helpful.” (Participant 6)

“[The] school have been supportive in giving virtual open days for sixth form and making contact regarding careers advice. It has been easier to support [year 11 child] with her questions around sixth form as we have experience of this through [year 13 child]. [Year 11 child] has been very proactive in applying for her university place and accepting this so this has made things easier for me and she has had a lot of support and guidance from school which has been useful.” (Participant 4)

Participant 5 praised the availability of resources to support their child’s decision-making about the future:

“I think information available these days is fantastic, the Internet and schools discussing career ideas from an early age. I guess sowing seeds for the future. At only year 9 we've not really looked into career

fairs etc. but I am aware of them taking place and would definitely attend these.” (Participant 5)

Another parent felt that their own experience of higher education, and SpLD, had been particularly useful when supporting their child:

“What has helped me is my higher education and knowing the struggles that children face so I am more proactive with kids and their work, but also counterbalance that with healthy mind and exercise too.” (Participant 3)

Finally, it was suggested that providing more opportunities for work experience and extra-curricular activities could be valuable resources for helping children to explore their options and make informed decisions about their future:

“I think it would be beneficial for children to gain a term of work experience for them to get an idea of what life is like when they leave school and what to expect.” (Participant 3)

“I would like to see more encouragement of children to get involved with extra-curricular events such as foreign trips, and drama/music etc. as it expands their horizons, and makes them look beyond their home town and the limitations of their parents.” (Participant 6)

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Conclusions

In summary:

- The identification of ‘hard-to-reach’ parents is complex. While some approaches look at economic and cultural contexts, it appears that understanding how practical and perceived barriers to engagement is also rooted in how the outreach initiative is situated in relation to the location, time, medium and constraints of the target population. This links back to the notion of assets for outreach as ‘gated’: not in terms of deliberate exclusion, but in terms of key factors that necessarily mean assets are harder to reach or engage with for some than others.
- As a result, there is a need for attention to ‘hard-to-reach’ parents to be clearly targeted, to ensure that the heading doesn’t drift into larger and more generalised categories which may reduce the effectiveness of an intervention.
- While a large amount of research has tied hard-to-reach with economic insecurity (for good reasons), this may overlook some of the more concrete contexts of Cumbria such as infrastructure and historical employment routes.
- The survey suggested that aspiration amongst parents and carers was not low. As such, addressing lack of engagement should be needs-based. As above, needs should be understood as holistically as possible, not only in terms of practical issues, but also in conceptual terms.<sup>7</sup>
- A key finding of the literature review was the need for engagement programmes to be long-term; engagement takes time and requires a large amount of trust between organisations and individuals, with regular evaluation of potential improvements.
- The findings of the survey suggest that there are wider ways in which this longer-term engagement can be managed. For example, given some parents’ use of their own experience of HE in guiding their conversations with young people, outreach programmes may consider utilising not only ‘services’ for young people but also those aimed at parents:

---

<sup>7</sup> For example, the range of contexts which may affect the notion of Cumbria as a ‘rural’ area were explored and detailed in Grabrovaz, M., Goodwin, V. and Grimwood, T. (2019). *Understanding the Rural and Coastal Contexts of Widening Participation*. Commissioned by Hello Future.

alumni associations, the visible presence of a university in an areas, and the accessibility of colleges and universities via open days.

- Working with and through voluntary and community organisations may help to address some of the more ingrained barriers between school and home, as well as providing important insight into needs. In short, outreach must not be considered in isolation to the wider assets of the area.
- A clear demand arose from the survey for clear and appropriate information for parents and carers. As the literature suggests, there is a need to be dynamic and flexible with how such information is communicated. More conventional methods of relaying information (including ‘top-down’ or didactic forms) may not always have the most success.
- The preference for on-line media also came out clearly from the survey. This was reflected in some ways in HASKE’s own experience of recruiting participants for section 5. While invitations for face-to-face or telephone interviews returned no interest (even with incentives), email surveys, where parents could answer questions at their own pace and at a time appropriate to them, returned a far better response.

## 7. References

Asmussen, K., Waddell, S., Molloy, D. & Chowdry, H. (2017) *Commissioning parenting and family support for Troubled Families*, Early Intervention Foundation.

<https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/commissioning-parenting-family-support-troubled-families.pdf>

Boag-Munroe, G. & Evangelou, M. (2012) 'From hard to reach to how to reach: A systematic review of the literature on hard-to-reach families', *Research Papers in Education*, 27, 2: 209-239. DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2010.509515

Campbell, C. (2011) *How to involve hard-to-reach parents: encouraging meaningful parental involvement with schools*, National College for Teaching and Leadership.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/340369/how-to-involve-hard-to-reach-parents-full-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/340369/how-to-involve-hard-to-reach-parents-full-report.pdf)

Davies, L. (2016) 'Are young fathers "hard to reach"? Understanding the importance of relationship building and service sustainability' *Journal of Children's Services* 11, 4: 317-329. DOI: 10.1108/JCS-03-2016-0007

Davis, F.A., McDonald, L. and Axford, N. (2012) *Technique is Not Enough: A Framework for Ensuring that Evidence-Based Parenting Programmes are Socially Inclusive: Discussion Paper – August 2012* British Psychological Society, Leicester.

[https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/18569/1/Technique\\_Is\\_Not\\_Enough.pdf](https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/18569/1/Technique_Is_Not_Enough.pdf)

Day, S. (2013) "'Terms of engagement" not "hard to reach parents"' *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 29, 1: 36–53. DOI: 10.1080/02667363.2012.748649

Day, C., Ellis, M. & Harris, L. (2012) *High Need Families Project: Development and piloting a new parenting intervention (The Helping Families Programme) for children with severe and persistent conduct problems*, Department for Education.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/318089/DFE-RR187.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/318089/DFE-RR187.pdf)

Department for Work and Pensions (April 2017) *Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families*.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/621364/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-web-version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/621364/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-web-version.pdf)

Department for Work and pensions (March 2020) *Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families Indicators 2020*.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/875273/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-indicators-2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/875273/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-indicators-2020.pdf)

Donnelly, S., Buchan, D.S., Gibson, A-M., McLellan, G., and Arthur, R. (2020) 'An Insight Into the Involvement of Mothers of Low Socioeconomic Status in Scottish Primary School Health Education Activities' *Health Education & Behavior* 47, 1: 111–22. DOI: 10.1177/1090198119871329

Education Scotland (2019) *Engaging parents and families: A toolkit for practitioners*

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/engaging-parents-and-families-a-toolkit-for-practitioners/>

Evangelou, M., Coxon, K., Sylva, K., Smith, S. & Chan, L.L.S. (2013) 'Seeking to Engage "Hard-to-Reach" Families: Towards a Transferable Model of Intervention', *Children & Society*, 27, 2: 127–138. DOI: 10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00387.x

Flanagan, S.M. and Hancock, B. (2010) 'Reaching the hard to reach' - lessons learned from the VCS (voluntary and community Sector). A qualitative study.' *BMC Health Services Research* 10, 92. DOI: 10.1186/1472-6963-10-92

Fletcher, J., Fairtlough, A. and McDonald, L. (2013) 'Engaging Young Parents and Their Families in a Multi-family Group Work Intervention: Lessons from a Pilot in England' *Practice* 25, 3: 151–167. DOI: 10.1080/09503153.2013.799647

Fretwell, N, Osgood, J, O'Toole, G & Tsouroufli, M (2018) 'Governing through trust: Community-based link workers and parental engagement in education' *British Educational Research Journal*, 44, 6: 1047–1063. DOI: 10.1002/berj.3478

Goodall, J. & Vorhaus, J. (2011) *Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement*, Department for Education.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182508/DFE-RR156.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182508/DFE-RR156.pdf)

Goodall, J. (2013) 'Parental engagement to support children's learning: a six point model' *School Leadership & Management* 33, 2: 133-150. DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2012.724668

Goodall, J. & Montgomery, C. (2014) 'Parental involvement to parental engagement: a continuum' *Educational Review* 66,4: 399-410. DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2013.781576

Goodall, J. (2019) 'Parental engagement and deficit discourses: absolving the system and solving parents' *Educational Review*. DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2018.1559801

Hello Future (2018) *Parent and Carer Voice Survey Data Analysis*. ABS Insight Limited.  
[https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Hello-Future-Parent-and-Carer-Voice-18\\_19.pdf](https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Hello-Future-Parent-and-Carer-Voice-18_19.pdf)

Hello Future (2020) *Parent and Carer Voice Survey Data Analysis, Phase Two, October 2020*. ABS Insight Limited. <https://www.hellofuture.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Hello-Future-Parent-and-Carer-Voice-FINAL-October-2020.pdf>

Hornby, G. & Blackwell, I. (2018) 'Barriers to parental involvement in education: an update' *Educational Review* 70,1: 109-119. DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2018.1388612

Hornby, G. & Lafaele, R. (2011) 'Barriegottrs to parental involvement in education: an explanatory model' *Educational Review* 63, 1: 37-52. DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2010.488049

Jones, E., Gutman, L. & Platt, L. (2013) *Family stressors and children's outcomes* Department for Education.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/219639/DFE-RR254.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219639/DFE-RR254.pdf)

La Placa, V. and Corlyon, J. (2014), 'Barriers to inclusion and successful engagement of parents in mainstream services: evidence and research' *Journal of Children's Services* 9, 3: 220-234. DOI: 10.1108/JCS-05-2014-0027



Lessof, C., Ross, A. & Brind-Kantar, R. (2019) *Multiple disadvantage and KS4 attainment: evidence from LSYPE2*, Department for Education.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/908927/LSYPE2\\_multiple\\_disadvantage\\_and\\_KS4\\_attainment.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908927/LSYPE2_multiple_disadvantage_and_KS4_attainment.pdf)

McEwan, F., Thompson, M., Laver, B.C., Jefferson, H., Koerting, J., Smith, E., Knowles, M., McCann, D., Daley, D., Barton, J., Latter, S., Elsey, H. & Sonuga, B.E. (2015), 'Innovations in Practice: Adapting a specialized ADHD parenting programme for use with "hard to reach" and "difficult to treat" preschool children', *Child & Adolescent Mental Health*, 20, 3: 175–178. DOI: 10.1111/camh.12069

McLeish, J., Baker, L. and Suppiah, C. (2016) 'How volunteers can work with parents to improve early childhood outcomes: A review of the evidence' *International Journal of Birth & Parent Education*, 4, 2: 7–12.

Neale, B. and Davies, L. (2015) *Hard to Reach? Re-thinking Support for Young Fathers*, Briefing Paper no. 6, University of Leeds. <https://followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/79/2015/10/Briefing-Paper-6-V7.pdf>

Osgood, J., Albon, D., Allen, K. & Hollingsworth, S. (2013) *Engaging 'Hard-to-Reach' Parents in Early Years Music-making*. [https://network.youthmusic.org.uk/file/4237/download?token=G7q\\_xbZ](https://network.youthmusic.org.uk/file/4237/download?token=G7q_xbZ)

Pote, I., Doubell, L., Brims, L., Larbie, J., Stock, L. & Lewing, B. (2019) *Engaging disadvantaged and vulnerable parents: An evidence review*, Early Intervention Foundation.  
<https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/engaging-disadvantaged-vulnerable-parents.pdf>

Royston, S. and Rodrigues, L. (2013) *Breaking Barriers: How to help children's centres reach disadvantaged families*. The Children's Society.  
[https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/breaking\\_barriers\\_report.pdf](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/breaking_barriers_report.pdf)

Schoon, I., Barnes, M., Brown, V., Parsons, S., Ross, A. & Vignoles, A. (2012) *Intergenerational transmission of worklessness: evidence from the millennium cohort and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England*, Department for Education.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/183328/DFE-RR234.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183328/DFE-RR234.pdf)

Scottish Government (August 2018) "*Learning together*" *Scotland's national action plan on parental involvement, engagement, family learning and learning at home 2018 – 2021*, Scottish Government. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2018/08/learning-together-scotlands-national-action-plan-parental-involvement-parental-engagement/documents/00539357-pdf/00539357-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00539357.pdf>

Sime, D. & Sheridan, M. (2014) 'You want the best for your kids': improving educational outcomes for children living in poverty through parental engagement, *Educational Research*, 56, 3: 327-342. DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2014.934556

Ward, H., Brown, R. and Hyde-Dryden, G. (2014) *Assessing parental capacity to change when children are on the edge of care: an overview of current research evidence*, Loughborough University Centre for Child and Family Research for the Department for Education.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/330332/RR369\\_Assessing\\_parental\\_capacity\\_to\\_change\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/330332/RR369_Assessing_parental_capacity_to_change_Final.pdf)

Welsh Government (2016) *FaCE the challenge together: Family and community engagement toolkit for schools in Wales*. Main Guidance. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/face-the-challenge-together-family-and-community-engagement-toolkit-for-schools-in-wales-main-guidance.pdf>

Watt, L. (2016) 'Engaging hard to reach families: learning from five 'outstanding' schools' *Education 3-13*, 44, 1: 32-43. DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2015.1122321

White J. (2018) *Children's social circumstances and educational outcomes*. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland. <http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/2049/childrens-social-circumstances-and-educational-outcomes-briefing-paper.pdf>

Whitmarsh, J. (2011) 'Othered voices: asylum-seeking mothers and early years education' *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19, 4: 535–551. DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2011.623540

Wilson, S. (2020) 'Hard to reach' parents but not hard to research: a critical reflection of gatekeeper positionality using a community-based methodology' *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 43, 5: 461-477. DOI: 10.1080/1743727X.2019.1626819