

An 'in-service' course for parents

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Developing a 'parental survival kit, 14+'

Heathfield Community School in Taunton pioneered a new-style parents' evening in January of this year. It was aimed at parents of year 10 & 11 pupils and looked at a wide range of issues which are of concern to parents and pupils — a sort of parent INSET! The evening was attended by 200 parents, which was an encouraging response. The two year-groups consist of 360 pupils, so taking into account a combination of 'single parent' and 'both parent' attendance potentially half the pupils were represented.

What was it about?

Senior staff (pastoral) and the Advisory Teacher for Health Education, Kath Wilson, met in order to plan the event. There was much discussion about what we were actually trying to achieve. Was it purely educational issues — the concept of coursework and extended homework, so different from what parents were used to in the O-Level days — or was it social issues which can militate against the work ethic? Parties, alcohol, drugs, relationships etc? Or was it just about the anxieties about being a parent of an adolescent?

Eventually it was decided it was all this and more! Therefore, the evening needed to be one of awareness-raising with a promise of following up specific issues with future workshops. This would enable parents to set the agenda.

Structuring the evening

Having decided the purpose, rather than having a vague notion emerging from a gut reaction that we were responding to a need, it was necessary to structure the event with respect to When? What? Where? and Who?

So far we had only addressed When and What, and the When was getting closer. After perusal of the school community diary we were committed to 22 January, and it was now November, with a whole host of Christmas events to worry about as well as this new initiative.

What?

It was decided to open the evening with a keynote speaker.

This would help to universalise the issues rather than making it a case study of 'our school'. It would also add prestige to the event and hopefully be attractive to our potential parent market.

This was to be followed by a brief brainstorming exercise transcribed at the platform on to a flip chart. This slot allowed parents to raise issues with the brief "what are the pressures on young people today?"

The next stage enabled parents to work in workshop discussion groups with a facilitator. Each group would be presented with a scenario applicable to teenagers. There would be half an hour to negotiate a strategy or strategies for appropriate courses of action and to prepare a flip chart sheet indicating the information.

Refreshments and a chance to look at displays of coursework, with relevant staff in attendance, would divide up the programme. A plenary session for feedback and the distribution of evaluation sheets was the chosen method of drawing together the objectives of the event.

Where?

School halls do not necessarily lend themselves to creating a conducive environment for this type of occasion. At Heathfield Community

One of the briefs was: What are the pressures on young people today?

An aim of the workshops was to allow under-the-surface social issues to emerge

School there is a drama studio (capacity 200) and a newly-built English Centre (6 classrooms, 2 alcoves, 2 seminar rooms and a staff room). We decided to house the introduction and plenary in the drama studio, the discussion groups in the English Centre classrooms and serve refreshments from the alcoves (a free-flowing space).

Who?

I invited Dr Martin Bloomer, a lecturer from Exeter University, to be the keynote speaker. He presented an excellent introduction and hit just the right note. As a parent of teenagers himself he was able to be anecdotal, as well as highlighting the academic pressures upon young people.

Dr Bloomer also led the initial brainstorming session, inviting the audience to turn round and discuss with one or two people nearby.

Group leaders

The choice of these was partly determined by attendance demand (so as to have no more than six in a group) and by the skills factor. It was thought to be of importance that the group leaders were skilled in facilitating discussion, keeping it to the point, and encouraging everyone to join in (see panel). The resulting staffing was made up of:

GROUP LEADERS' BRIEF

About 15 individual parents will have a small card with your initials on and will join you in your designated room. Your role is as a facilitator.

1. Please ask each person to turn to the person nearest them and in a pair talk about:

- (a) *Why did you decide to come tonight?*
(b) *What do you hope to get out of the evening?*

2. Divide your group into three smaller groups (of about 5). Give each small group a scenario A, B or C. Each group nominates a spokesperson. Come up with a reaction to report back to the group of 15.

3. The Group Leader notates on a piece of flip chart to be displayed and used as a résumé. Bring flip chart back to drama studio.

4. Please ensure that the discussions are kept as impersonal as possible — e.g. not "my son X gets too much homework from Mr Y" (and so it transgresses!).

5. Ensure no-one dominates!

Kath Wilson, *Advisory Teacher, Health Education*

Nigel Laycock, *Advisory Teacher, PSE*
Two Senior Management Staff, *pastoral*
Two Year Heads
Three Deputy Year Heads
One parent (*with previous experience*)

Detail

The following had to be addressed:

- *Workshop scenarios*
- *Groupings*
- *Group Leaders' brief*
- *Final plenary details*
- *Evaluation strategy*
- *Timings*
- *Resources*

Workshop scenarios

We constructed the three scenarios presented in the box opposite and asked each group to work on one. However, each person received a typed sheet of all three so as to be aware of the brief of other groups.

The scenarios were intended to be specific and 'authentic', tangible but allowing under-the-surface social issues to emerge.

Groupings

These needed to be 'random' so that parents of the same pupil were not in the same group. This would allow freer and more varied discussion. Practically this was organised in the following manner:

1. Each group leader's workshop space was labelled with a large piece of coloured card with their initials on.

2. Upon arrival, each participant was handed a small version of one of these coloured cards. They were given in rotation so that, providing parents of the same pupil arrived simultaneously, they were unlikely to be in the same group!

3. As participants were invited to go to workshop spaces the significance of the cards was explained.

This system worked well and we have used it since in the first follow-up evening.

It was essential to be definite about attendance numbers by using a reply slip attached to the letter of invitation.

SCENARIOS FOR THE WORKSHOP EXERCISES

Situation A

Your youngster wants to watch a television programme. You know that he/she has a coursework deadline tomorrow for work that is, as yet, unfinished.

What would be possible courses of action for an "amicable" solution?

How would you go about discussing this with your daughter/son?

Situation B

A friend invites your youngster out mid-week. You know at school next day there is a mock GCSE/Modular assessment starting at 9.00 am. The function in question finishes at 11.30 pm. ETA at home will be 11.45 pm; apparently "Everyone's going".

What would be possible courses of action?

Situation C

Your child has been offered a part-time job with a local shop. The hours are non-negotiable — two evenings 6.00 pm–8.00 pm and Sunday morning 9.00 am–12.00 noon. This will earn £20.00 per week.

What would be your reaction?

(Regulations of Employment: Children and Young Persons Act Amended 1972 states:

No child shall be employed on school days during school hours nor for more than two hours on any such day and then only after the close of school hours before 7.00 pm except that for the delivery of milk or newspapers a child may be employed between 7.00 am and 8.00 am but if a child works both mornings and evenings it must be for the same employer. No child shall be employed on any Sunday for more than two hours and not in any case

(i) before 7.00 am;

(ii) after 10.00 am except in the milking or feeding of livestock; when the employment shall cease at or before 7.00 pm.)

Evaluation strategy

At the outset the planning committee decided to aim at raising awareness of issues, rather than providing answers. This inherently demanded a detailed evaluation of the follow-up workshop evenings on specific related issues should there prove to be requests.

Evaluation was three-part.

1. An evaluation questionnaire given out at the end of the evening.

2. A letter sent to each participant with the flip-chart scenario responses collated.

3. A series of follow-up workshops put into operation.

Group leaders' brief

A short meeting was convened in the week of the parents' evening (see the brief on the opposite page).

Due to shortage of time and numbers involved we decided that group leaders would display the flip chart sheets around the walls of the drama studio for others to read or compare. This was not entirely satisfactory as it did not allow discussion of salient points.

There was a sense of addressing real concerns . . . "Thank goodness I'm not the only one."

The session itself centred on a "where do we go from here?" approach, which explained the importance of the evaluation sheets to be handed out.

The 'atmosphere'

The whole event was buzzing with expectation. It was quite different to the traditional appointment style 5-minutes-with-each-teacher-slot annual occasion. There was a sense of addressing real concerns that are beneath the surface. Without exception, all the parents participated freely in small groups. The sense of camaraderie was evident during the return from the English Centre to the drama studio, where comments such as "Thank goodness I'm not the only one" were vocalised. When we dispersed at the end, the fact that parents held back to talk informally demonstrated that we had not exaggerated their need to share common experiences as parents of teenagers.

Exploring other issues

Information collated from the evaluation summaries produced the following list of topics, with the number of requests:

Study skills	13
Course work	5
Drugs	4
Study/time management	4
Health issues	3
Police and young people	3
Relationships	3
Communication	2
Parties	2
Peer pressure	2
Families	1
Homework	1
Interview skills	1
Post-16 opportunities	1
Stress	1
Work experience	1

The methods advocated for organising future workshops were as follows:

48 votes: Groups of parents, staff and young people

24 votes: Groups of parents and staff

22 votes: Separate evening sessions with representatives from outside organisations

15 votes: Small groups of interested parties

First follow-up session: Study Skills

The first 'parent survival kit, 14+' workshop was held in June. It was open to Year 9 and 10 parents and pupils, and 70 attended. The random-grouping system mixed parents and pupils so that everyone worked in a group of six containing a mixture of ages, genders and families.

On this occasion it was unnecessary to open the event by setting the scene or with philosophical debate, as parents and pupils had arrived specifically to take part in the workshop. With this in mind, the introduction was little more than a welcome followed by an explanation of the logistics of the evening's timetable.

Study-related issues

The first exercise (20 minutes) in small groups was a brainstorm flip-chart exercise examining issues which determine effective study. Flip-chart sheets were then briefly shared with the whole group. Even though 'reporters' were asked not to repeat any point made by another group, only pupil reporters kept to this request!

Parents seemed to enjoy illuminating points which ranged from negative peer pressure to lack of self-confidence and to part-time jobs; on

PARENTS' EVALUATION FORM

Would you please complete the questions below, either by placing a tick in the appropriate box or by adding your own comments. There is no need to add your name to the sheet unless you particularly wish to do so.

1. It would be useful to have some comments on this evening to help in planning future evenings of this kind. Would you please describe briefly:
 - (a) The most useful activity.
 - (b) The most difficult activity.
 - (c) An activity on which you would like to spend more time.
2. You may wish to consider other important issues in more detail. For example: helping with studies; the police and young people; general health issues; would you please list any in which you might be interested.
3. In what ways would you be interested in exploring and developing these issues:
 - (a) Small groups of interested parents.
 - (b) Groups of parents and staff
 - (c) Groups of parents, staff and young people
 - (d) Separate evening sessions with representatives from outside organisations.

Thank you for completing the questionnaire; we will be sending out a summary of the evening's discussion, the results of the evaluation and some more detailed proposals for the future.

the positive side they referred to music (interestingly), competition for grades between friends, regular breaks and short-term goals.

Skimming and recall

The second task, also in small groups, was a practical reading and recall session: the purpose of this was to look at the skill of skimming. This was great fun. The group leaders gave each person in their group a passage to read (subject matter, electricity) — they had ten minutes, working in pairs, to read the passage and be tested by their partner on knowledge recall and understanding. Group leaders encouraged pairs to work as pupil/adult, wherever possible.

Just to add to the atmosphere we introduced distractions rather than allowing uninterrupted study, thus attempting to simulate a pupil's need to impose self-discipline. The distractions included coffee and biscuits available in the cor-

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ridor and stimulating, controversial newspaper articles and magazines.

Group leaders were briefed to observe behaviour, and the dynamics of my group were fascinating. There were three pairs: (a) a year 9 pupil and a year 10 male parent, (b) two female parents, and (c) one male, one female parent.

Pair (a) managed excellent recall: they were 'on task' the whole time. The pupil remembered nearly the whole of the passage and the parent floundered in comparison. Pair (b) spent most of the time giggling and saying they couldn't do it! Pair (c) worked quietly, managing to grasp most of the principles of the passage. These observations themselves could provide subject-matter for a whole paper concerning gender, mixed-age working groups, etc.!

Following the exercise itself, the group leaders' brief was to draw this part of the session together by discussing how each pair tackled the task, how individuals affected each other — giving confidence, or chatting, or being encouraging — and then to relate this to actual experiences as a parent or pupil and to bring out any other points before the final plenary.

Reassurance

One of the most touching moments for me was the feedback from pair (a) to the rest of the small group. It summed up the spirit of what the evening was all about. The parent openly talked about his feeling of inadequacy in advising his own child. He didn't understand the work his child was doing, especially coursework, and was aware of the futility of his efforts to help: this often ended in arguments. His partner, a year 9 pupil, reassured and gave suggestions. If the whole evening succeeded in nothing else, this moment was worth it!

The evening concluded with a whole-group session led by two of the study leaders. The content was delivered by OHP, and highlighted revision and study-skill methodology. Participants were all given supporting handout materials, booklists, and an evaluation sheet.

Disappointingly, the evaluation returns on this occasion were few (11 out of 70). As a result it has been decided to issue these forms at the beginning of future evenings to be completed at the end, rather than relying on returns the following day. However, the evaluations received were very positive, and highlighted concerns for addressing the following at future workshops:

Pupils who attended the study-skills session sense a genuine concern on the part of adults for their welfare.

Teenage behavioural changes — unexpected alterations in motivation

Overcoming nervousness as a pupil

Learning skills

How to be motivated and how to concentrate

The future

Having embarked upon responding to a need, the responsibility for continuing has to be embraced. We are now into a new academic year. The working party plans biannual large-scale evenings, probably involving parents of year 9 pupils as well as years 10 & 11, as many of the issues were highlighted as relevant at that stage.

In a sense, we intentionally 'played safe' by having our first workshop evening on study skills — this is something tangible and relatively straightforward to address. I believe we now owe it to the parents, and therefore the pupils, to consider some of the more controversial, problematical issues raised as a result of initial evaluation: drugs, health education, and stress. The point here is that topics tend to be inter-related, and this very factor can encourage the addressing of 'safe' issues.

So, having reached the point of no return, I feel that the partnership between the school and parents of the 14+ age range has been strengthened, communication lines are increasingly two-way, and tutors who were not involved in the actual running of the evenings speak warmly of the terms of reference they have opened up between pupils, parents and staff. Another interesting benefit is that both within the curriculum and in tutorial sessions, pupils who attended the study-skills workshop are able to articulate the experience and sense a genuine concern on the part of adults for their welfare.

It is hoped that the next stage will be to enable parents to become group leaders. There is no need to assume that only teachers and advisory teachers can operate in that capacity — far from it. As soon as the next workshop is being planned, parents will be invited to join the planning team and be involved throughout the process as group leaders. We go on from strength to strength — I hope!

Conclusion

The response to this initiative has been very successful so far. Apart from the practical information and help gained, just meeting with each other to discover that other parents are experiencing similar problems with teenagers was

beneficial. One evaluation sheet included the following comment:

I was heartened to receive the letter explaining this evening and feel that the school's recognition of this area of a young adult's life is just another illustration of a very caring school. It is good to feel that as parents we are not alone. I'm very glad that I came. Many thanks.

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I hope that this account of the practical problems encountered and solved will be useful to others thinking of embarking on the same course. The overwhelming conclusion appears to be that communication and recognition are, without question, gratefully received by parents and pupils.

Any school interested in further details or assistance is welcome to contact me.