



Parent'R'Us Awareness Raising Tool for Teachers

Key messages:

- All parents can support the learning of their children, but some may not be able to support their schoolwork.
- Building equal partnerships with parents is a step towards real inclusion in education.
- You need to know the parents of your children and be open to them to build partnerships. You can best rely on them for support, but you can also seek support from your colleagues or school leader.

The role of parents in educating their children and their relation to school

Parents are the primary educators of their children. This not only means that they are the first educators, but research also shows that they have the largest impact on the learning – including school learning – of their children. This primary role is present until the age of 11-12 when it is overtaken by the peer group. Contrary to common belief, it is never the teacher who has the largest impact.

At the same time, **parents are also responsible for the education of their children, and the school's role is a supporting one.** Most parents want the school to help with some of their educator duties, mostly those they are not capable of doing. In the case of disadvantaged parents this is even more dominantly the case. For school success, you need

to do two things: help parents celebrate school success, and abandon all practices, e.g. homework that require the active support of parents. In order to really support disadvantaged children for school success, you should support a different kind of learning at home. You may want to promote discussion around the dinner table or encourage parents to read for pleasure to be role models for their children. Surprisingly enough, these activities are two of the very few that have a proven positive effect on school success. Some disadvantaged parents need to be reminded that they have done a terrific job educating their children already to boost their self-esteem.

Benefits and challenges of engaging with parents as partners in your work

Your school head may have already asked you to revisit your communication with parents and to build an equal partnership. In the Parent'R'Us approach we promote parental engagement as compared to involvement. You will want to engage parents in both the learning of their children and school life. **When promoting engagement, you need to be conscious of the difference between celebrating learning and having to sit down with children to study.** For equity and inclusion you should encourage the first and forget the second.

This simple chart will help you design engaging with parents of your students:

Involvement	Engagement
Who is involved/engaged?	
Parents	Parents and children + family and community
What is in the focus?	
School with teaching in centre	School, parents, learner with learning in centre
How it is done	
School initiative, formal meetings	Flexibility of form and timing
Communication is	
One-way school to home	Two-way, use of technology is dominant

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Understanding your own mindset about parents, especially vulnerable parents

Research conducted in the Parent'R'Us project as well as long-term experience of partners working in the field show that first and foremost teachers need to identify their pre-conceptions about disadvantaged parents who usually differ from them greatly in many ways. This can then be the basis for changing mindsets, overcoming prejudices and becoming open to differences. **If you want to establish a parental engagement culture in your school, your teachers need help achieving mutual trust and appreciation.** It needs to be initiated by the teachers as professionals.

Research clearly shows that in the majority of European countries the profile of teachers is closest to white, middle class, middle aged, female with a low level of diversity. Migrant and Roma communities are especially under-represented in the teaching professions while their children are the most vulnerable and at risk of school failure. Thus, it is very likely that you or at least many of your colleagues fall into the majority category. Motivation research also shows that those choosing teaching as a profession are relatively risk-averse and opt for the school as a workplace being closest to values, behaviours and practices they consider their own. However, parent engagement is only possible if it is based on mutual respect and equal partnerships. Thus, teacher training needs to accompany administrative measures that focus on:

- Widening teachers' knowledge and understanding of diverse social and ethnic groups;
- Identifying and overcoming prejudices;
- Offering tools for partnership with people different from teachers in general.



Specific needs of vulnerable families

Parents' engagement has a proven direct positive impact on school success as well as the well-being of children at school. However, you need to consider the following:

- A high percentage of these parents have bad schooling experiences that have a direct impact on their attitude towards teachers and schools.
- **Many of these parents don't feel comfortable in the school** as a physical space, thus policy needs to encourage school-related discourse to happen at safe third places (with the possible engagement of community organisations).
- A high percentage of these families need information as well as active support during engagement opportunities in languages other than the language of instruction.
- Even if the language they feel comfortable speaking is the language of instruction, their linguistic register may be different from that of the teachers, and they may not understand education jargon.



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Engaging with vulnerable, “problematic” parents as equal partners

Establishing an equal partnership with all parents is only possible if you understand both them and yourself, especially any factors in your mindset or knowledge that may hinder your professional, proactive approach.

“Hard-to-reach parents” is a commonly used notion, but we encourage you to rather think about parents you haven’t yet managed to engage. You are the professional, and you need to take the initiative, but do so taking cultural and linguistic differences into account. You also need to understand that some parents appear to be problematic because their trust in school is low due to bad personal experiences. Some parents may find the school, the most familiar environment for you, frightening, and you can only build partnerships if you leave your physical comfort zone. You may need to rethink the timing of meeting parents, but you also need to consider yourself when adjusting meeting times. Technology can help, but you need to set the rules for using it together, for example agreeing on when somebody can call you or expect a reply.

Benefits of PRUS mentoring for parents

Supporting vulnerable families is only successful if it is built on trust. At the same time, it is **also important to boost the self-esteem of vulnerable parents and help them become conscious, equal partners at school.** The Parent'R'Us mentoring model is an exceptionally good tool for achieving this, while it can be a successful and affordable policy tool. By training you or your colleagues or involving community organisation representatives to act as mentor managers, and subsequently trainers of parent mentors, the approach provides a very effective approach to renewing a mentor pool of upcoming generations of parents.

The Parent'R'Us mentoring model foresees peer mentoring from parent to parent that supports an equitable parent engagement policy in two ways. On the one hand, mentors – who are parents coming from the same disadvantaged background as mentees – are acknowledged and rewarded as

successful role models for their community when they choose to become mentors. On the other hand, mentees see a role model in the mentor parent who is very similar to them, offering them an easy role model to follow. As vulnerable parents often do not trust authority, including teachers for various reasons, this approach is especially suitable for reaching out and engaging them by building back trust via a peer they trust and easily identify with.

Your mentor parents can also act as mentors, coaches and trainers for you and help appreciate disadvantaged parents and to build partnerships with them. They can be the bridge, especially when there are major cultural differences between you and the parents.



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