

Improving parent-child relationships through Family SEAL

Key messages:

1. Families may resent being 'targeted'. Skills and experience of the tutor are fundamental to resolving these issues;
2. Improving parents' engagement with school;
3. Increased bonding and supportive networking between parents;
4. Increased confidence of parents and improved parenting skills.

Having successfully piloted the four week Family SEAL¹ course earlier in the year in other city venues, this school was the first to host the full eight week course covering all of the SEAL themes and domains. They were very keen to have the course and remained proactive in the recruitment of parents of children who were persistently absent from school.

Initially there was some scepticism and hostility amongst the parents, which they voiced openly and vociferously during the first few sessions. They felt that they had been targeted by the school to attend the course because their children were seen as 'difficult' and they themselves were seen as difficult/ambivalent parents. After several weeks and some delicate and diplomatic discussions between staff, tutor and parents, the atmosphere calmed quite significantly and there appeared to be a volte-face by all the parents – they recognised that the course was interesting, informal, beneficial and fun and felt that they were lucky to be a part of the first eight week course to run in the city, and to be 'chosen' by the school to attend.

Prior to the course, some of the parents did not feel that they had a good relationship with the school and several parents said they felt uncomfortable being in the school and working alongside the staff. Again, these concerns and fears appeared to be dispelled and a co-operative and friendly relationship between school and parents was established which, it is believed, will now continue.

For some members of the group, it was the first time they had come into the school, attended a course or become acquainted with other parents living locally. One particular parent, who has a background of depression/mental health difficulties, poor literacy skills and low self esteem, grew hugely in self-confidence and her enthusiasm to learn and better herself and her children's

¹ Family Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning:
http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/66383?uc=force_uj

outcomes was immensely rewarding. Initially, she was reluctant to attend, but is now able to speak in front of the group, offer advice and support and make friends and is keen to keep on learning.

The group formed a strong network as they came together each week and gradually opened up to one another, sharing experiences and supporting one another. During the course, the confidence and self-belief of some learners grew visibly, friendships were made and kind gestures shown. The group is now enthusiastic and motivated and is planning to continue to meet every week, with the assistance of the Parent Support Worker.

All the learners reported positive changes, some significant, in their home and family life. In the final session the parents were able to accurately recall all the themes of SEAL and gave anecdotal evidence of how they had successfully practised the skills and suggestions at home with their children. All of the parents reported how much their children enjoyed these 'special afternoons' and also learning with and spending time with their parents at home:

"I think this has made me a better mum...I listen much more than I used to. I am calmer and more patient...and I am now more aware of his feelings and ways to listen to him and help him. It has given me lots more ideas to try at home."

"I feel so much more confident in dealing with [my son] now. At first I said he was awful...a monster who was out of control. I now know that I can sort things out and not let things go as I used to...like sleeping - I really didn't think he would ever sleep and I thought the videos and advice was a load of rubbish...but it worked!! I couldn't believe it, I now see how important it is for him to get a good night's sleep and why he maybe behaved the way he did...he was tired and I gave in all the time. Now I can sort it out – I have done it. My relationship with him is now brilliant because really he is brilliant."

"I never really came out of the house before. I have really enjoyed spending the time with my children. I have learnt loads that is going to help me with my kids. I now think I am a good parent and I feel so much more confident. It has opened my eyes to my children....I understand their feelings better and I am now able to listen to them more. I can now talk to people and in front of other people. I would like to say that I think I am a happier person since I have done this course."

"I try to treat my children as individuals now. I know we share more time together – we have now proper family time. I have been really happy to attend each week and mix with the group. My kids have loved me joining them in their school."

Nottingham Family Learning