

Disabled parents and schools

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*Barriers to parental involvement
in children's education*

Jenny Morris



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INTRODUCTION

There are 2.1 million disabled people in the United Kingdom who have children under 16 (Stickland, 2003). The Government encourages all parents to be involved in their children's education and emphasises that children's progress at school is related to their parents' involvement. However, disabled parents can face significant barriers to such involvement. This is a form of social exclusion that has an impact on both parents and children, and urgently needs to be tackled.



This paper draws on the experiences of disabled parents to set out some of the barriers they experience. It follows the report of the Task Force on Supporting Disabled Adults in their Parenting Role, which identified disabled parents' involvement in their children's education as an area of considerable difficulty (Morris, 2003). Individual disabled parents were consulted in the preparation of the paper and information was also provided by groups representing disabled parents. These sources of information are listed in the Acknowledgements. The consultation included disabled parents from black and minority ethnic communities (including a focus group organised by Equalities for the project); parents with learning disabilities, mental health support needs, physical and sensory impairments; and Deaf parents. Most of the parents who took part were mothers; some were lone parents. In total, about 45 parents were consulted. While the briefing is not representative, it nonetheless reflects the experiences of a diverse group of disabled parents.

The briefing identifies the questions that schools, governing bodies and local education authorities should address in order to tackle the barriers faced by disabled parents. A summary of these questions is set out in an Appendix at the end of the paper, where some questions are also addressed to the Department for Education and Skills concerning central government's responsibilities.

1 RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Guidance issued by the Government says that:

Everyone who is a parent ... has a right to participate in decisions about a child's education ... School and LEA staff must treat all parents equally.

(Department for Education and Skills, 2000, para. 12)

There is much evidence that children do better at school when their parents take an interest in their education and involve themselves in their homework. The Government encourages such involvement and at the same time stresses parents' responsibility to ensure their children attend school.

Disabled parents can, to some extent, look to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to both protect them from discrimination in their relationship with schools and accord them the adjustments that might be required to enable them to be fully involved in their children's education. The non-educational services provided by schools, governing bodies and local education authorities are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act and this includes services provided to parents (Department for Education and Skills, 1999, para. 63). Schools, governing bodies and local education authorities 'must not unjustifiably refuse to provide a service, provide a worse service or offer a service on less favourable terms to a disabled person' (Department for Education and Skills, 1999,

para. 65). They must also 'take reasonable steps to change policies, practices or procedures which make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to use a service' and also 'provide auxiliary aids or services which would enable disabled people to use a service, and overcome physical barriers by providing a service by a reasonable alternative method' (Department for Education and Skills, 1999, para. 66). The guidance says that schools, governing bodies and local education authorities 'should not wait until a disabled person wants to use a service before considering what adjustments might be made but should take positive steps to make their services accessible to disabled people' (Department for Education and Skills, 1999, para. 66). From October 2004, the adjustments required will include physical alterations to premises.

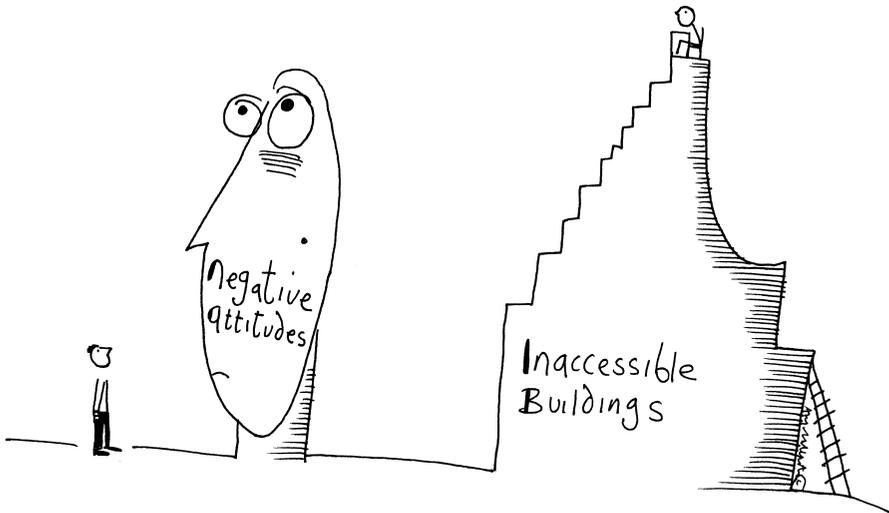


The Disability Discrimination Bill currently before parliament introduces a new duty on public authorities requiring them to ensure that disabled people do not experience unlawful discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people. This duty will apply to local education authorities and school governing bodies. The bill also extends the remit of the Disability Discrimination Act to all functions of public bodies (not just the services they provide). Any uncertainty about whether disabled parents are entitled to expect reasonable adjustments from schools, governing bodies and local education authorities should therefore be removed.

In *practice*, however, disabled parents experience significant barriers to fulfilling both their ambition and their responsibility to be involved in their children's education.

2 BARRIERS EXPERIENCED BY DISABLED PARENTS IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOLS

Parents' relationships with schools can be divided into a number of different stages and aspects. Disabled parents experience difficulties at each stage of their relationship with schools. These difficulties are created by two main barriers: unhelpful or negative attitudes; and a failure to make buildings and communication accessible.



Finding out about schools and applications to schools

Written information

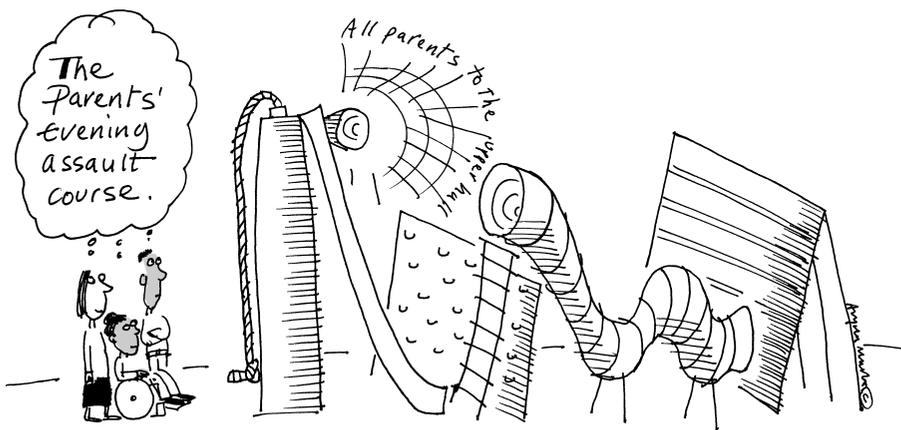
Schools and local education authorities produce written information for parents. The Government itself produces performance tables showing how pupils from each school have done in both Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) and GCSEs and A levels. For many parents with visual impairments, this written information will not be accessible unless it is made available on tape, in large print or in Braille. Written information may also be inaccessible to parents with learning disabilities and those Deaf parents for whom English is a second language.

All forms of written information about schools, made available to the public, are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act. Schools, local education authorities and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) should be able to provide such information in accessible formats when requested. However, it would appear that it is rare for financial provision to be made for schools to produce information in accessible formats. Individual schools may also face practical difficulties in turning standard text into different formats, and may lack the advice and assistance to do this.

Visiting schools

The DfES encourages parents to find out about local schools by visiting them. However, many disabled parents experience significant difficulties when they try to do this. Sometimes these difficulties are a result of unhelpful attitudes. When one parent who uses a wheelchair turned up at an open day for a tour of a school, she was informed by the headteacher 'Two sets of wheels

– that’s a problem. I do a fast tour, you’ll never keep up.’ Another parent who has difficulty walking said, ‘On the first-year tours, I’m always left behind in the hall, not looking at the school facilities with other parents’. A parent with a visual impairment wrote of the importance on open evenings of getting ‘a feel for the school environment, for example, from the amount of litter and the state of the buildings to the range of children’s work displayed’. It would be helpful, she went on to say, ‘if teachers were more aware of the needs of disabled parents, listened and asked “How do you want me to help with this?”’ (*Disability Pregnancy and Parenthood International*, 2002/03, p. 3).



The DfES encourages parents, when looking around a school, to ‘Observe the children’s work and check the school’s resources. Does it appear to be a happy school where everyone is serious about learning?’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Parents with visual or hearing impairments may find this difficult to do unless attention is paid to their access needs. One parent consulted for this briefing had a positive experience:

The head was very sensitive. When I went into classrooms she asked some of the children to read me their work so I could hear what they were doing even if I couldn't see it. She also described things to me that were going on.

Making applications to schools

When it comes to making applications to schools, parents may find that forms are inaccessible to them. This can mean relying on someone else to fill them in and this is not always what they want. Application processes and procedures, including appeals, are however covered by the Disability Discrimination Act. It is unclear whether much thought has been given, by the Government, local education authorities or schools, to making them accessible.

Some parents will place a high value on the accessibility of the school for them, particularly when their children are young and at primary school. Proximity of the school to home may also be particularly important if the parent is to take a child to and from school. A parent's access needs should therefore be recognised as a criterion for getting a child into a school that may be oversubscribed but that is, for example, physically accessible to the parent. As one parent said:

With [my daughter's] application to primary school, we were able to put in a 'special case' for her going to that school due to my physical disability – this was our nearest school by a long way but very popular and incredibly oversubscribed.

Questions for local education authorities and schools

- Does written information about schools comply with Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) Clearprint standards?
- Is written information jargon free and in plain English?
- Is written information about schools available in Braille, large print, on audio tape, signed video, in local community languages?
- Does someone at the school take responsibility for meeting the access needs of parents who want to look around the school?
- Do application forms and procedures take into account a variety of access needs?
- Do admissions policies and criteria take into account access needs of parents?
- Do appeals procedures take into account parents' access needs?

When children start at a new school

Parental involvement is particularly important when children start at nursery or primary school. The attitudes of teachers can make all the difference in terms of making this possible for disabled parents. One parent with a visual impairment had a particularly positive experience:

My son started primary school in August this year. When I registered him for school in January of this year I mentioned that in order to help my son with his homework I would require any reading books and information to be made available in accessible formats. I also requested mobility training around the school building so that I could become familiar with the layout enabling me to navigate the school environment independently.

The school has been absolutely fantastic. Within two weeks of registration I received the school handbook in an accessible format. They organised mobility training with a teacher I knew and this was undertaken in May prior to my son's school induction. The peripatetic teacher for visually impaired children associated with the school met with me and discussed my requirements. We agreed a font size that would be most accessible to me and she started the process of transcribing my son's primary one reading books immediately into large print and also Braille (as my eyesight has steadily deteriorated in the last two years) so that if my sight were to go down completely (as it sometimes does) I'm in a position to assist my son with his homework.

This parent welcomed the way that the school consulted with her about her access needs. It is helpful if schools have a general awareness of access needs and at the same time ask parents what their particular needs are – as was the case with another parent who has Asperger's Syndrome (AS):



My eldest son has just started primary school ... When we went to look round the school we mentioned my AS to them, they immediately responded by asking how they could help me to be involved with my son – would I like to drop him off a bit early or late when it was quieter? They hoped I would try to get involved in smaller gatherings and social events I felt able to handle and do let them know if I needed any help with anything! I was astonished and thrilled by this reception.

A general awareness of access needs combined with a willingness to consult and listen to parents is particularly important when someone has a non-evident impairment. For example, parents who have conditions such as sickle cell anaemia say it is important that schools understand how they might be affected and what their access needs might be.

Questions for schools

- Do you ask parents if they have any access needs in order to be involved in their children's education?
- When the child of a disabled parent starts at your school, do you encourage the parent to be involved?

Access into schools

Parents often emphasise that accessibility is about more than the physical environment – staff attitudes and behaviour are crucial. As one parent said: 'It's an old school so it's not really accessible but they've gone out of their way to be really helpful' (Sunderland Support Group for Parents with Disabilities). In contrast, negative attitudes can exclude parents altogether: 'I was told, "We don't have room for a wheelchair in our nursery"' (Wates, 2003, p. 24).

Barriers within the physical environment can be created by other people's behaviour. For example, parking by other parents can cause problems when they obstruct pavements, dropped kerbs, etc. The lack of parking for disabled parents was an important issue for a group of parents in Sunderland who are carrying out research on experiences of schools. They concluded that parking bays for disabled people should be provided near schools and monitored by traffic wardens to prevent misuse. A helpful solution offered to one parent was that she was allowed to park in the school staff car park when dropping off and picking up her child.

Physical access is not only about level or ramped access for parents with mobility impairments. It is also about lighting and colour contrasts, which make it easier for visually impaired people to enter and move around a building. As one parent said:

They need to think about the size and colour contrasts of signs in schools, the layout of rooms, whether there are good colour contrasts and lighting in corridors and staircases, having white lines to indicate where there are steps – all these things make a school accessible. The RNIB has guidelines for this kind of thing and I wish schools would use them.

Loop systems in rooms where meetings and events are held can also make schools more accessible for people with hearing impairments.

Questions for local education authorities

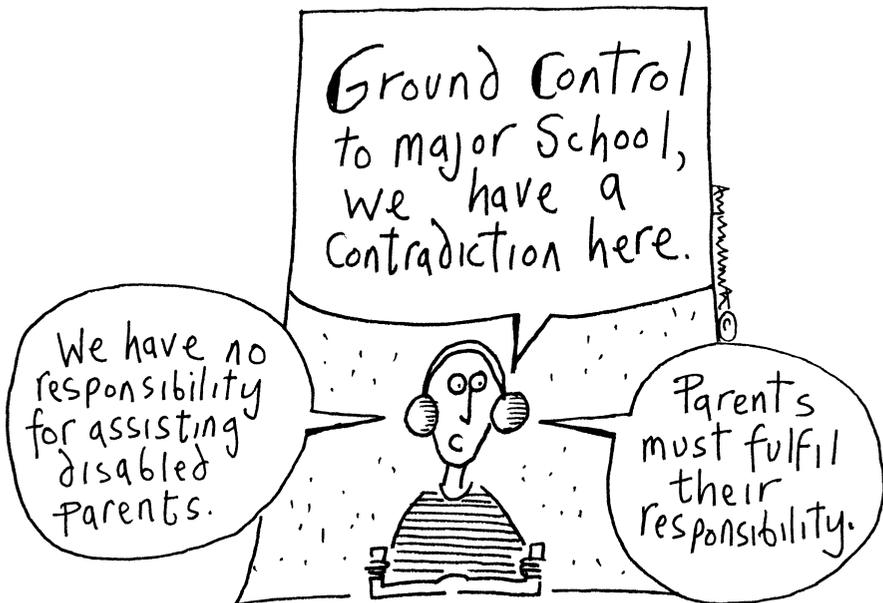
- Do you make financial provision for making schools accessible to all parents?
- Do you provide information and advice for schools to enable them to be accessible to all parents?

Questions for schools

- Have you carried out access audits of all your school buildings?
- Do you seek advice from relevant organisations about how to make your buildings accessible?
- Do staff receive disability equality training?
- Do you welcome all parents into your school?

School transport

The Department for Education and Skills informs parents that: 'If your child is registered as a pupil at a particular school, you must ensure that they attend regularly' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). The emphasis is on parents' responsibilities to make sure that children attend school each day. Yet getting children to school is a major problem for some disabled parents, particularly for lone parents who do not have a partner to rely on to do this. Parents who have sought assistance with this aspect of their parenting role from social services have found it very difficult to get such assistance. The responsibility tends to be passed between different agencies and departments. This means that parents can find it very difficult to fulfil their responsibility to ensure their children attend school. It is not helpful if the local education authority denies any responsibility for assisting disabled parents and at the same time insists that parents fulfil their responsibility.



A group of parents in Sunderland note that transport is provided for disabled children but not for disabled parents, unless their children are also disabled: 'Parents with disabled children described school transport as very helpful [but] school transport was not available for families without disabled children'. The group recommends that: 'Being a disabled parent should be part of the criteria for support with transporting children to school'.

School transport would not of course be suitable for all disabled parents, particularly those with young children – unless they were able to accompany their children on the bus. It is important that local education authorities recognise that some parents will require assistance if they are to fulfil their responsibility to ensure their children attend school each day. Such assistance should be provided in ways that support rather than undermine parents' involvement in their children's education.

Questions for local education authorities

- What arrangements have you made to find out whether disabled parents require assistance in order to ensure their children attend school?
- What arrangements are in place to provide such assistance?
- When making any arrangements do you consult with parents about what type of assistance would be suitable?

Questions for schools

- Are you aware of the difficulties some parents may have in getting their children to school?

- Do you liaise with the local education authority on providing any assistance needed?

Parents' involvement in their children's education

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) encourages parents to be involved in their children's education and, to this end, produces a series of *Learning Journey Guides* to provide parents with information about what their children are doing at school at different stages in their education. However, although this information is available in Braille, audio cassette and large print, and in some minority community languages, it is not available in British Sign Language (BSL) video format nor in a format suitable for people with learning disabilities. When asked whether information was available in BSL video format, the DfES responded:

While the Department tries to ensure that its information is produced in such formats that allow the majority of parents (or other interested people) to access them we cannot produce items in every possible language or format.¹

Relationships with teachers

When parents have good experiences of their relationships with schools, this is usually because the teachers and staff have positive attitudes towards them as parents, an awareness of possible access needs and a willingness to ask parents about any assistance they might need.

The particular importance of positive attitudes was highlighted by parents with learning disabilities consulted for this piece of work. One parent with learning disabilities, for example, appreciated that her children's teachers treated her with respect: 'They don't lecture me', she said. In contrast, another parent stated: 'They talk around me. They'll talk to whoever I'm with and not to me.'

Parents with learning disabilities also sometimes find that teachers do not initially recognise that they have access needs and this can cause difficulties: 'Teachers don't understand you've got a learning disability. They don't like repeating things.' Another parent said: 'They don't think about using shorter easier words, or using pictures, or showing you' and then, unfortunately, once teachers do realise a parent has a learning disability, 'they treat you like a kid'.



Some parents find it extremely frustrating if teachers use words that they do not understand. When they express their frustration, this can create considerable difficulties in their relationship with teachers. As one parent with learning disabilities said: 'People don't see that I have problems. I get to the stage where I get irritated and swear a lot.' She felt that, if her access needs had been recognised in the first place, she wouldn't have got so angry.

When Deaf parents have themselves been to schools for Deaf children, they may have very little knowledge of mainstream schools or what to expect. This legacy of their own educational experiences can be misinterpreted by teachers as a lack of interest in a child's education. Differences between hearing and Deaf cultures can also result in teachers misinterpreting Deaf parents as being rude or abrupt. Using hands very quickly and facial expressions when signing is also sometimes misinterpreted as aggressive behaviour. Behaviour can also be misinterpreted when the parent concerned has autistic spectrum disorder.

If schools were more aware of the effects of impairment and illness, they would also recognise that disabled parents' access needs can change over time. Impairment may fluctuate over time or a condition may be progressive. One mother who has bi-polar disorder said:

When I was in a 'down' phase, it was very difficult to bring myself to go to a parents' evening. But that didn't mean I didn't want to know how my children were doing and I really appreciated it that the teachers used to ring and basically we had the same kind of discussion over the phone that we would have had if I'd managed to make it down there.

Communication between school and parents

There is a large amount of written information that flows from school to parents: newsletters, children’s reports, home/school books, information about homework, school trips, term dates, teacher training days. One parent who has a visual impairment said:

There’s a stream of letters which come home. All in bog standard font size. It should be noted on a child’s file if their parent needs information in a particular format.

Parents consulted through Equalities, a national organisation of black and minority ethnic disabled people, said that hand-written reports can be difficult to read for those with visual impairments and especially difficult when English is not the parent’s first language.



Some teachers rely on children to tell their parents items of information that would normally be conveyed in written form or by direct communication between teacher and parent. This happens when, for example, the parent has a visual impairment and could not access a written letter about a school trip; or where a parent has a hearing impairment and uses a text phone rather than a voice phone. It is rarely appropriate to rely on children when, if the parent did not have access needs, the teacher or school would be communicating directly with parents.

There are examples of good practice in communication with disabled parents, which illustrate that it can be done. Some schools use fax, text messaging or email to communicate with Deaf or hearing impaired parents. Some use Text Direct or install a text phone and train school staff to use it. Email can also be an accessible form of communication with those parents with visual impairments who have the appropriate computer software. Some schools put information into large print or on audio tape. One parent praised her children's school:

Any ad hoc information is sent home in large print or emailed to me to ensure that I receive the information at the same time as any other parent.

It is important to remember that parents also have the right to see their children's education records but, if these are not in an accessible format, the school will need to take some action in order to fulfil this responsibility.

Parents' evenings

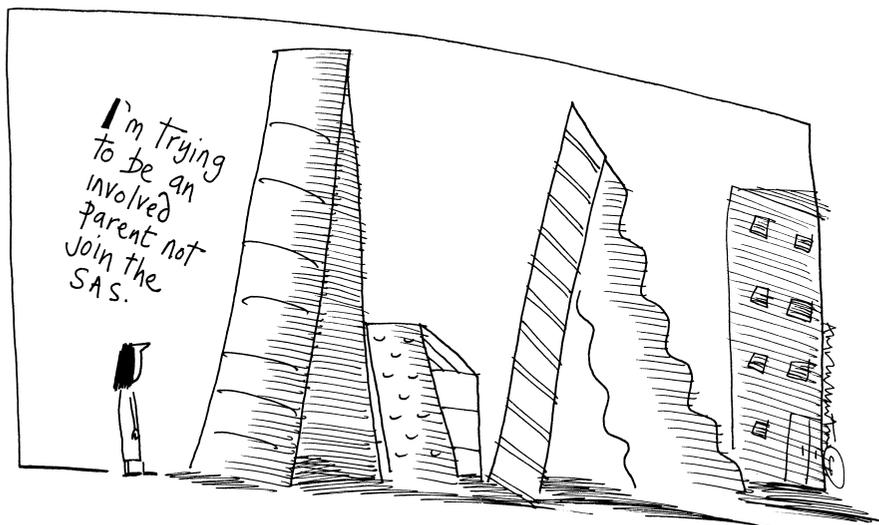
Parents' evenings are a source of some frustration and distress for many disabled people because of the access difficulties caused

by how they are generally organised. As one parent with restricted mobility recounted:

I could get into the school but at the parents' evening you have to be with the teacher in one department and five minutes later you have to be down the stairs and up another set of stairs to meet the teacher of another department. It wasn't practical that I could run around the school from one department to another.

Another said:

The worse situation was the parents' evening, which was held in *[my child's]* classroom and I had real difficulties getting to see her teacher. Only the reception area was accessible, which was very busy with parents arriving and leaving and offered no privacy and the teacher was very reluctant at first to make special arrangements to see me outside the classroom.



The importance of attitudes was illustrated by one parent's positive experience. Although the school wasn't fully physically accessible, the teachers made it possible for her to be involved in parents' evenings: 'They would bring things to us rather than us having to trek around'. And another parent, whose impairment means that sometimes she can't leave the house, said: 'They would reschedule appointments if I couldn't go to parents' evening'.

A disabled parents' support group highlighted the need for Deaf and hearing impaired parents to have access to interpreters or loop systems. However, as one parent said, 'I have never found any school willing to supply an interpreter'. If a parent requires a Sign Language Interpreter, this can also be prohibitively expensive for a school. One school calculated that they would need to spend £1,500 a year on interpreting support for a parent who is Deaf/Blind and yet this school does not have this amount of money to

This School isn't perfect,
yet, but ~~but~~
it is flexible.



spend even on books. This is an all too common situation, which arises because of a lack of financial planning – at central and local government level – for fulfilling schools’ duties under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Helping children get the most out of education

Some parents have access needs in relation to supervising and helping with their children’s homework. They need accessible information about what homework is expected from their children. As one parent with a visual impairment said: ‘How does a parent know what the task is, especially for younger children who can’t read?’. She has three children, two of whom are also visually impaired, and their homework and books are in large print so she can access them. However, she has had much more difficulty supporting her child who does not have a visual impairment because accessible formats have not been made available.

Other parents who were consulted stressed that schools should also be able to provide information about the availability of, for example, signed videos on the school topics, audio tapes of text books, resources written in plain English and so on. Parents (and teachers) often do not know that there are such accessible resources. Ideally, they should be made available on loan to parents.

Many parents find they have to act as an advocate for their child in the context of difficulties at school, whether these are academic or social issues (such as bullying). Disabled parents may have particular access needs if they are to advocate for their child and, if these access needs are not met, then they cannot fulfil this vital role. These access needs may take the form of, for example, having an anti-bullying policy available in Braille, on tape or in large print, in order that the parent knows what procedures the school should follow when a child is bullied. Or it may be that

a parent is concerned at their child's lack of progress in learning to read and, because they have a learning disability themselves, they need someone to act as an advocate in seeking an assessment, diagnosis and, if necessary, a Statement of special educational needs.

One social worker, consulted for this briefing, spoke of her difficulties in getting schools to recognise that Deaf parents need BSL interpreting support if they are to fully participate in meetings about their children. In one case, the school refused funding 'indicating that they had always ensured parental involvement by writing letters to the child's parent, which they said were always ignored'. The parent concerned had poor literacy as a result of her own experience of education when a child.

A number of parents consulted had children who have a Statement of special educational needs. These parents said they felt unable to participate properly in annual reviews of Statements if they were not given information in accessible formats. One parent with learning disabilities described how, if information were to be provided on an audio tape or a video, this would help her to be more involved in the meeting. Professionals involved in Annual Reviews often use jargon and acronyms, and this can exclude parents.

Parents with non-evident impairments sometimes experience a lack of understanding that they may have particular access needs.

One such parent, who has Asperger's Syndrome, said:

I have struggled with the underlying assumption from professionals, the LEA and (to a lesser extent) the school's SENCO [*Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator*] that I am not disabled myself in expecting me to deal with things relating to my son's special educational needs.

Questions for schools

- Are you proactive in seeking to meet parents' access needs in order that they can be fully involved in their children's education?
- Do you ensure that teachers do not rely on children to interpret for their parents, or pass information on to their parents?
- Are teachers aware of the possible impact of impairment (such as autistic spectrum disorder or learning disabilities) or cultural heritage (such as Deaf culture) on social behaviour and interaction, and are they careful not to misinterpret behaviour?
- What thought has been given to making parents' evenings accessible to all parents? Have parents been asked if they have any access needs in order to attend and participate in parents' evenings?
- Do you ask parents if they need written information in an alternative format?
- Are home/school books, school reports, newsletters, letters to parents, information about school trips and events all made available in accessible formats?
- If a parent asks to see their child's education record, can this be made available in an accessible format?
- Do you talk to parents about what they need in order to supervise and help with children's homework?

- Do you provide information for parents about education resources in accessible formats?
- Do you ensure that staff are aware that a parent may have an impairment that affects their access to the school and involvement in their child's education, yet the impairment may not be visible?

Questions for local education authorities

- Is financial provision made for putting written communications between schools and parents into accessible formats?
- Is financial provision made for the costs of interpreters?
- Do you make education resources in accessible formats available to parents on loan?

Parents' involvement in the life of the school

Schools expect parents to come to school events such as jumble sales, Christmas concerts, school plays, Parents' and Teachers' Association (PTA) and governors' meetings. Some parents are unable to do this, however, because of unequal access and negative attitudes.

Sometimes disabled parents are put off from attending events because of unhelpful attitudes. As one parent said: 'Staff should have some disability equality training – they shouldn't be saying things like "The wheelchair goes over there"'. On the other hand, positive attitudes can increase a parent's willingness to be involved in the life of the school:

The school's positive response to my requests and to me as a lone parent has made a big difference to my willingness to become involved in PTA and school activities.

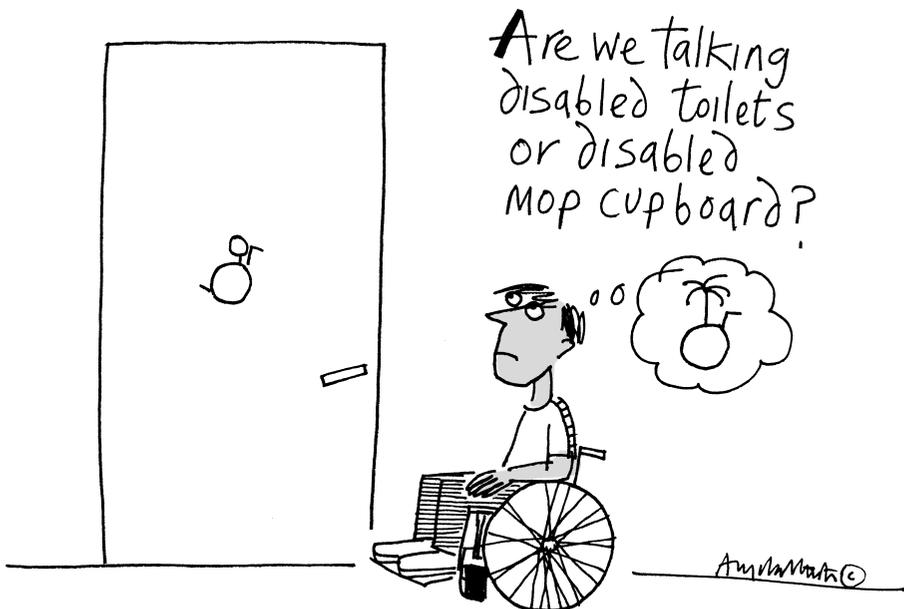
Another parent wrote of her experience as a teacher helper, two mornings a week, for the last three years. This had been instigated by the headteacher and the school built a ramp so she could get into the building.

Parents find it particularly difficult when schools are not proactive about access issues. As one parent said: 'It's always me who comes up with the solution and they never even raise access issues with me', while another wrote:



My secondary school for the last three years have held their AGM in an inaccessible hall till I phone them up and then they grudgingly move it. It would be nice if they held it in the accessible place anyway and positively invited disabled parents to come.

Some parents with physical impairments find it impossible to attend events if they are expected to sit on chairs suitable for small children and there are no others available. This can mean that they are excluded from plays, concerts, governors' and PTA meetings. Wheelchair-accessible toilets also make a difference between inclusion and exclusion, and it is particularly galling when there is a wheelchair-accessible toilet but, as one parent found, 'it's used as a mop store and I can never get into it unless I get someone to clear things out'.



Many disabled parents may want to exercise their right to stand as a school governor but may well be inhibited from doing so if written material concerning the activities and elections of governing bodies is not available in accessible formats. One parent with visual impairments reported that her school would not produce written material in a format accessible to her until she herself became a parent governor.

Another parent consulted has also been elected governor at his children's school. He is blind and is able to participate in school life in this way only because he uses the transcription service that he works for to make printed material accessible. He is aware of 14 other visually impaired governors in his county, yet neither the local education authority nor any individual schools have budgets for making printed information accessible for parents.

Questions for schools

- Do you find out what access needs parents have in order to attend school events?

Questions for governing bodies of schools

- How are elections for the governing body made fully accessible to all parents?
- Do you produce reports and other documents in accessible formats?
- Are meetings held in accessible venues?

Questions for local education authorities

- Is funding and practical advice and assistance available to make school events accessible to all parents?
- Is funding and practical advice and assistance available to make the activities of governing bodies accessible to all parents?

School values and ethos

Disabled parents' groups have pointed out that schools have a big impact on how children, teachers and other parents perceive disabled people in general and disabled parents in particular. If the school's values and culture promote the idea of disabled people as objects of pity and curiosity, this will be reflected in attitudes towards disabled parents and their children. If difference is viewed negatively then, as an Australian piece of research found, parents are likely to receive 'comments from others that [reflect] attitudes and behaviour that [are] intolerant, discriminatory and unjust' (Robinson *et al.*, 2000, p. 18).

One mother described how a school culture that tolerated playground insults resulted in her daughter enduring taunts of 'Your mum's a fucking cripple'. Negative attitudes were also found among teachers at this school:

General teacher attitudes have proved quite negative – for example, *[my daughter's]* science class was recently doing bodies, illness and health and I was very proud to hear that she announced 'my mum is disabled but healthy', only to have this challenged by her teacher – apparently disabled people cannot be healthy! – and *[the teacher]* then stopped any class discussion around this.

One parent reported that: 'My oldest, aged 10, was told about these poor people who need everyone's help. The teacher brought my name up as an example. My daughter was very upset' (PANDA, 1995, p. 14). A parent consulted for this piece of work expressed her concern that identifying the children of disabled parents as 'young carers' can lead to teachers having low expectations of them.

Black and minority ethnic parents consulted for this project reported racist attitudes as well as disablist attitudes and behaviour from schools. This echoes findings from a previous study of black families in Manchester (Jones *et al.*, 2002), which reported that many parents experienced disablist attitudes that made them feel



excluded, and actively excluded them, from their children's education. This prevented their involvement in addressing any difficulties their child might experience at school. These parents found that teachers made negative assumptions about the level of interest they had in their children's progress because they were not always able to attend parents' evenings.

However, some parents have had very positive experiences of the general ethos of their children's schools and the resulting positive attitudes towards them. One parent, who has mental health difficulties and experienced admissions to hospital throughout his two children's schooling, wrote of how:

I was always treated with respect as an ordinary parent by the schools. I had quite a lot of contact with staff at fundraising events, open evenings, etc. As far as I could detect I was treated with the same respect and courtesy as other parents and my problems were not discussed. I know some children have a 'caring' role thrust upon them but I don't think that was the case with mine, although of course they played an important part in my life in terms of 'meaningful occupation' and at my low points as a reason for living. I was always afraid when they were children that my problems would mean that they would suffer some stigma from their peers (children can be cruel) – as far as I am aware this does not appear to have been the case.

Some schools welcome disabled parents' involvement as a way of promoting an awareness of diversity. One parent recounted:

I used to help out in a classroom occasionally and this was seen as positive experience for the children who had

never met a wheelchair user before. The school also invited other disabled speakers to talk with the children from time to time.

Another parent suggested to her daughter's primary school teacher that she should come and talk to the class about her impairment, 'because I didn't want the children asking my daughter why I've got little arms'. The head then suggested that she should talk to the whole school:

She linked it to what they were doing on 'All about me'. This also addressed the teachers' curiosity ... Before I did it children were staring and pointing at me. Afterwards they said 'Hello Mrs Baker'.

Another mother said that she felt that her daughter's school's policy of 'equal rights, equal opportunities' influenced how she was treated as a disabled person: 'There was a good attitude throughout the school – not just the teachers but also the office staff, the midday staff, everyone'. If schools recognise the existence of disabled parents and involve them in the life of the school, this could help schools in their goal of encouraging children to value diversity.

Questions for schools

- Does your anti-bullying policy cover bullying on the grounds of impairment, illness and appearance?
- What action have you taken to teach children that words like 'spastic' and 'cripple' are unacceptable?

- Do children in your school taunt each other about their parents' characteristics and situations?
- Do you invite organisations such as Disability Equality in Education² to run whole-class/school activities promoting positive attitudes towards diversity?
- Have you examined any charitable activity that you engage in to ensure that it does not convey negative images of disabled children or adults?
- How do you promote children's knowledge of illness and impairment as part of life?
- When you encourage children to value diversity, does this include people with learning disabilities, with physical and/or sensory impairments, and with mental health support needs?

Questions for school governing bodies

- Does your anti-bullying policy cover bullying on the grounds of impairment, illness and appearance?
- What steps are you taking to monitor the effectiveness of this policy?
- How do you promote a school ethos that values diversity, including disabled children and adults?

3 CONCLUSION

The subject of this briefing is not a new issue for disabled parents. The unnecessary barriers to involvement in their children's education have been consistently highlighted by parents over the last ten years or so (see, for example, PANDA, 1995; Wates, 1997) and this briefing has drawn on these publications as well as more recent experiences. While the issue is all too apparent to disabled parents, they themselves seem to be invisible to schools, governing bodies and local education authorities, and indeed to the Government. Their access needs do not figure in the planning of school buildings, the writing of policies and procedures, the holding of meetings, the involvement of parents in the life of the school or communication between school and parents. Consequently, individual disabled parents are all too often faced with a literal or metaphorical closed door in their relationship with their child's school. When they seek to do what any parent wants to do – talk to a teacher, go to a parents' evening – they have to argue for what is often seen as a 'special arrangement'. This can, at best, feel like an inconvenience and, at worst, places a burden on the school's scarce resources because disabled parents' access needs have not been sufficiently recognised by central government or local education authorities.

This exclusion of disabled parents is in stark contrast to the philosophy of inclusion so admirably promoted by Government and local education authorities in relation to children, and the recognition of disabled children's access needs by both legislation

(the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2000) and targeted resources (the Schools Access Initiative, etc.). The failure to recognise that some parents will come within the Disability Discrimination Act's definition of 'disabled' is a legacy of past prejudices. There was a time when it was assumed that disabled people could not be parents. That time should be long gone. There are in fact 2.1 million disabled people in the United Kingdom who have dependent children below the age of 16 (Stickland, 2003). If they are to be accorded the same rights, and are expected to accept the same responsibility, to be involved in their children's education, then schools, their governing bodies, local education authorities and the Department for Education and Skills need to urgently address the barriers outlined in this paper.

NOTES

Chapter 2

- 1 This was the response given to a social worker in 2001 who asked about the availability of information accessible to Deaf parents. As at January 2004, the DfES still does not produce information in a BSL video format.
- 2 Disability Equality in Education (DEE) provides training for teachers and others to challenge attitudes and change practice so disabled pupils and students can be included in schools and colleges.
Tel: 0207 359 2835
Website: <http://www.info@diseed.org.uk>

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APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

Questions for the Department for Education and Skills

- What action is being taken to ensure that local education authorities and schools fulfil their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act in respect of services to parents (as set out in Circular 20/99)?
- What financial provision is being made to enable local education authorities and schools to fulfil their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act in respect of services to parents?
- What advice and information is provided to enable local education authorities and schools to fulfil their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act in respect of services to parents?

Questions for local education authorities

- Is all information for parents available in accessible formats?
- Do application forms and procedures take into account a variety of access needs?

- Do admissions policies and criteria take into account access needs of parents?
- Do appeals procedures take into account parents' access needs?
- Do you make financial provision for making schools' services to parents accessible to all parents?
- Do you provide information and advice for schools to enable them to be accessible to all parents?
- Do you make education resources in accessible formats available to parents on loan?
- Is funding and practical advice and assistance available to make the activities of governing bodies accessible to all parents?
- What arrangements have you made to find out whether disabled parents require assistance in order to ensure their children attend school?
- What arrangements are in place to provide such assistance?
- When making any arrangements do you consult with parents about what type of assistance would be suitable?

Questions for schools

- Is information for parents available in accessible formats?
- Do you ask parents if they have any access needs in order to be involved in their children's education?

- Have you carried out access audits of all your school buildings and your methods of communicating with parents?
- Do you seek information from parents about whether they require information in a particular format and whether they have access needs when attending events such as parents' evenings?
- Are you aware of the difficulties some parents may have in getting their children to school?
- Do you liaise with the local education authority about any assistance needed?
- Do you provide information for parents about education resources in accessible formats?
- How do you promote a school ethos that values diversity, including disabled children and adults?

Questions for governing bodies of schools

- How are elections for the governing body made fully accessible to all parents?
- Do you ensure that information, events and meetings are accessible to all parents?
- How do you promote a school ethos that values diversity, including disabled children and adults?

