

Supporting neurodivergent students by developing the home-school partnership



School resources

Creating an inclusive environment is essential to supporting neurodivergent students in schools, and a key part of the success of inclusion rests with the student's family and whānau. Families and whānau of neurodivergent students can sometimes feel like outsiders. They may have multi-agent involvement in their child's life, and education is just one small part of their daily challenges. Being invited into the school and having their opinions sought can be incredibly empowering. There are a number of strategies and approaches that schools and teachers can use to build robust partnerships with families and whānau and ensure the success of the student.

Building partnerships with families and whānau of students with learning needs

The concept of including families and whānau in a student's educational journey is not new. Research has long reflected this as a key aspect of effectively meeting a student's needs. Families and whānau of neurodivergent students, along with most families, appreciate and value a positive home-school partnership. This can be as simple as a quick email to acknowledge a student's success in a particular task or a challenge they have overcome. Communication does not need to be arduous but it does need to be consistent. Whānau need to feel that they are part of their child's educational journey, their opinions and beliefs are heard, and the partnership between home and school is genuine, robust, and strengths based.

According to the Education Review Office (ERO) in New Zealand, parents of children with 'special needs' expect:

- To be valued by the school community;
- To be treated with respect;
- School personnel to be empathetic and to welcome their child for their difference;
- To work in partnership with the school;
- To be involved in working towards solutions;
- To share the responsibility for their child's wellbeing and learning¹.

The Ministry of Education's Learning Support Delivery Model² reflects the growing understanding that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is outdated and not adequate for meeting neurodivergent students' needs. It also clearly outlines the necessity to truly value the partnership with families and whānau so that they are included in important decisions, and that support is provided in ways that work for them and reflect their identity, language, and culture.

There are six key elements to a successful home-school partnership:

1. **School leaders** have a vision and commitment to working in partnership with families and whānau;
2. **Relationships** are based on mutual trust and respect;

3. **School culture** encourages families and whānau to be involved in key decisions and schools provide a prompt response to questions and concerns;
4. **Learning partnerships** include contributions from families and whānau about their child's education;
5. **Community networks** facilitate consultation, and whānau and community contribution is valued;
6. **Communication** between home and school is timely, useful, and easily understood³.

A robust partnership with families and whānau is a natural part of a school's commitment to inclusion, including a meaningful connection to the local community. It is one where families and whānau are part of the decision making, so that decisions with regard to their child's education are made with rather than for them.

The teacher's role in developing the home-school partnership

Teachers play a critical role in developing an effective relationship with families and whānau. According to ERO, parents want to engage with teachers and schools to support their child to achieve success, but it is important that engagement is based on relationships between parents and school personnel that respect diversity⁴.

Research suggests that the home-school partnership is effective when:

- There is regular communication between home and school;
- This communication is both formal and informal;
- Teachers share positive feedback in a timely manner;
- Teachers' concerns are shared, again in a timely manner;
- There are clear expectations between the teacher and family and whānau;
- The purpose of this partnership is clear (the student's learning and wellbeing);
- There are open invitations from the teacher to families and whānau to attend meetings;
- Meetings with families and whānau celebrate the student's success, and identify what the student is learning and how well they are doing;
- Meetings provide the opportunity for families and whānau to develop the student's learning goals.

It is important to remember that families and whānau of neurodivergent students are often expecting the 'worst' when teachers contact them. They may have had numerous negative interactions with teachers and senior leaders over a series of years. It can feel like an endless battle and one that is draining for families and whānau who are doing their best. Receiving positive feedback (in whatever form and however small) can be incredibly powerful and have a positive knock-on effect for the student as well.

How might this communication look?

There are many informal and formal ways in which communication with families and whānau can be established and maintained.

Informally

- Catching up with the student's families and whānau at drop off and pick up time (this is possible in primary and intermediate schools, although less so at secondary schools).

- A post on the school's digital communication platform, such as a picture of the student's writing with a simple comment.
- An email or text acknowledging a student's success on a task.
- Formally
- A communication book – a daily or weekly update written in the book which goes between home and school. This can be useful if there are specific goals that the student is working towards.
- Extended parent-teacher interviews which allow more time for discussion to ensure that families and whānau do not feel rushed or pressured.
- IEP (Individual Education Plan) meetings, usually held once a term and run by the school SENCO (Special Education Needs Coordinator) or LSC (Learning Support Coordinator).

Preparing for and running a formal meeting with the family of a neurodivergent student

A formal meeting will be successful if the teacher has prepared for it thoroughly and runs it effectively. Here are some ideas.

Preparation for the meeting

Think about the following:

- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- What is needed to ensure that the purpose is fulfilled?
- Will there be anyone else from school at the meeting, such as the SENCO or LSC (which can be particularly useful when discussing neurodivergent students)?
- Are there any other professionals that need to be at the meeting, for example, the student's RTLB (Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour), or specialists such as Educational Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, or Speech Language Therapists, where applicable?
- Will the student be at the meeting for all or some of the meeting? How will the student's voice be captured? (see more on student voice below)
- What is the framework for the meeting: for example, if it is an IEP meeting, do you have the school IEP template?
- Who will write and share the agenda prior to the meeting?
- Who will send the invitation to families and whānau, and other attendees?
- Who will book a quiet space for the meeting?

Running the meeting

Consider the following:

- Taking minutes and chairing the meeting (following the shared agenda) are important but it is very hard to do both. Do you need another person from school to be at the meeting, even if they are not contributing? This person can take minutes whilst you chair, which means that you can give the discussion your full attention. This is essential in terms of respecting families and whānau, engaging with them, and ensuring their contribution is heard and noted.

- Cultural considerations, such as opening with a karakia or prayer.
- Setting a timeframe at the start of the meeting, for example 'We will meet for an hour - if we need more time after that we can always schedule another meeting'.
- Outlining a clear purpose for the meeting.
- Using strengths-based language and a strengths-based approach: focus on what the student can do rather than what they can't do.
- Using a solutions-focused approach, rather than simply talking about challenges and difficulties.
- Leaving time at the end of the meeting to summarise what has been discussed, what actions are going to be taken, by whom, and when.
- Ensuring that next steps are clearly outlined, and that families and whānau are clear about these.
- Capturing and sharing student voice
- Bringing student voice to the meeting is important, because including student and whānau voice is both critical and beneficial in decision making. This may happen in a range of ways, such as:
 - The student is invited to the meeting to share their voice;
 - The student talks with a trusted adult (teacher, teacher aide, SENCO/LSC) prior to the meeting;
 - If the student is older they can be sent questions digitally to answer, which is often an effective way to gather student voice at intermediate and secondary level.

What to do if the meeting becomes challenging

Sometimes meetings can be unpredictable – emotions are involved and can become heightened. As noted above, it is always advisable to have another person from the school at the meeting to provide support. If you sense the discussion has become challenging or stressful for families, it might be helpful to:

- Bring participants back to the agenda – see this as your anchoring point throughout the meeting;
- Acknowledge that discussing a child's needs can be challenging for families;
- Use phrases such as 'As a school we realise that your child will need extra support', 'Thank you for being so honest about how you feel at this point', and 'We will continue to do our very best to support your child'.

Follow up

After a meeting, share the minutes to each attendee via email. This email can also include the date and time of the next meeting if that has been decided. Ensure that agreed next steps are carried out, and then evaluated with the student, their whānau, and any other people who were involved in the meeting.

References

<https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/partnering-with-parents-whanau-and-communities/partner-with-whanau-in-school-wide-decision-making-and-self-review/>

Endnotes

- 1 Education Review Office (2008). Partners in learning: Parents' voices. Wellington: ERO. Retrieved from <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/partners-in-learning-parents-voices> <https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/collaborative-planning-for-learning/understanding-the-learning-support-delivery-model/>
- 2 Ministry of Education (2019). Learning Support Delivery Model. Retrieved from <https://inclusive-live-storagestack-assetstorages3bucket-3uty0hejzw6u.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/public/inclusive-education/resources/files/Learning-Support-Delivery-Model-working-together-Nov-2019-1.pdf> ; Ministry of Education (nd). Understanding the Learning Support Delivery Model (LSDM) and new models for collaboration. Retrieved from <https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/collaborative-planning-for-learning/understanding-the-learning-support-delivery-model/>
- 3 Ministry of Education. Inclusive Education: Parents, whānau and communities. Retrieved from <https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/partnering-with-parents-whanau-and-communities/>
- 4 Education Review Office (2008). Partners in learning: Parents' voices. Wellington: ERO.



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