

DEVOTED SCHOOLS

DEVOTED PARENTS



12 KEYS FOR A SOUND PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

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DEVOTED SCHOOLS DEVOTED PARENTS

12 KEYS FOR A SOUND PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

Working on a **close parent-school collaboration gives an added value for everyone:** for the child, the parents, the teacher, in fact for the whole school and the wider community. As a school, it is important to assume your role in this. And to be flexible and open towards parents starting from a professional role. After all, parents are not always sure about their role in school life. There are all kinds of factors that influence parental involvement: past experiences, knowledge, skills, own beliefs,... The extent to which parents perceive that the school is open to them is an essential building block for a bond of trust. Even in corona crisis where physical proximity is made difficult, that bond of trust remains most important.

"We find that if we want to help children move forward, you really need the parents too," he says.

School teams and parents can learn a lot from each other if they recognise and leverage each other's expertise. The challenge is to see parental involvement as a **reciprocal school-parent relationship**: instead of just informing parents about the school, it is also about what the school can learn from parents about the child.

In this brochure, we offer 12 keys to start working on this with the school team. These 12 keys are the result of the diligent and passionate work of six Aalst primary schools and two day-care centres. They participated in an intervention process on parental involvement starting with the youngest preschool children. The keys themselves were developed by parents in poverty and teachers in a King Baudouin Foundation project: www.kbs-frb.be/fr/Virtual-Library/2014/309473.

Through testimonies and inspiring actions, we concretised these 12 keys in the context of the City of Aalst.

Many thanks and appreciation to all schools and nurseries involved in the intervention project: SBS De Regenboog, DvM Basisschool, Faluintjes, Mezenestje, SMI Moorselbaan, SMI Sint-Anna, SMI Moorsel-Immerzeel & 't Speeltreintje. Sincere thanks also to the City of Aalst and the LOP for making this peer review process possible.





START WITH THE ELEMENTARY: SMILES, GOODBYES AND RESPECT

Good parent-school collaboration starts by ensuring that **parents are seen and greeted**. How can we make parents feel welcome in the school? How to create a warm atmosphere where parents know they have a place too? Even in COVID times, you can create this feeling through various digital and face-to-face trajectories. A mouth mask on the one hand prevents people's full facial expressions, on the other hand we train ourselves to make better eye contact. People really do see the difference between friendly, inviting eyes, or eyes that don't or look away.

When we talk about parental involvement, we often think of the school organising activities for parents, which parents are then expected to attend. However, these activities are not very successful if there is no sound basis: simply **daily contact** in a friendly, conversational atmosphere. Greet everyone with small words: hello, how are you,... By actively, decisively pursuing this, after a while you also get a lot of respect and greetings back from the parents. Moreover, children see that their teacher and their mother/father have a good relationship. Experiencing this continuity is very important for children and especially for the youngest preschoolers: it significantly reduces fears, increases their wellbeing and thus their ability to learn. After all, an ensured parent usually means an ensured child.

*"Greeting each other is by now a fine habit at our school.
We receive people as we would like to be received ourselves."*

Besides daily contact, making **first contact** is essential. The first meeting between the parent and the school, and especially the atmosphere in which this happens, helps determine whether parents feel welcome. A parent who gets a good feeling from the first contact is more likely to return to school if needed. The first contact determines how high or low the threshold is. How can you make this a friendly, low-threshold moment of connection without overwhelming parents with procedures and appointments? For many parents, especially of a first child, this is a very exciting milestone.



*"We want to make our **enrolment moment** less formal so that time can really be made for the family with their personal questions. This is where contact is made with their child's future principal and teacher."*



GETTING STARTED

AN ELEMENTARY ATTITUDE IN ALL CONTACTS WITH PARENTS

Some schools turn an **info moment** into a convivial accessible event. A drink, a snack are rarely missing, sometimes older students are brought in to show parents and children around.

An **enrolment moment** is more than going over and signing formalities. Sometimes enrolment is split from a real chat with children and parents. Parents still know little about the school context and mainly need reassurance. A positive basic attitude from the enrolment team is important: open and active listening, accessible communication.

"Our decision to keep the guided tour during corona was quickly made. Over the past few years, we have noticed that classroom visits really pay off. Parents simply want to see their child's school and classroom environment and so they ask questions more easily during the first contact with the teachers. In the corona period, we used a video as an alternative, but this did not have the same effect."

"The teacher is actually the person parents want to see. Involving them all the time in an enrolment proved to be important so that it is not merely something administrative."

ENROLLMENT AND WELCOME POLICY OF THE SCHOOL

Parents' first experiences with the school determine the subsequent contact moments and the cooperation between parents and school.

Reading tip: a (Dutch) brochure with concrete tips!

www.aanpakschoolfacturen.be/tools





TAKING FAMILIES AS THEY ARE, WHERE THEY ARE ZE ZIJN

Our education system often focuses on the pupil (in the making) and sometimes, albeit unintentionally, pays less attention to the family in which children grow up. Yet parents often have the same educational goal as teachers: they want their child to become language proficient, to develop, to learn a lot, to develop their own identity, to become part of society, to become socially competent, ... This is where there are great opportunities to build a **partnership**.

The big challenge, of course, is 'how' to enter into that partnership with parents. **Parents' concrete questions** are an important starting point for the teacher. Listen carefully to parents' questions. Proactively probe them and be open to concerns that may seem irrelevant to you. A parent who asks how things are going in the circle moment (start of the day with alle the children) wants more than a general answer like 'we talk to each other'. Parents want to know if their child occasionally tells you something about home, because to them that is a signal that the child is feeling good. If you also add in how you pick up on what the child says in the circle moment, the parent is reassured that you notice and include their child in the class. Same for parents inquiring about lunch, playtime, nap time, toilet ...

Another important element in the dialogue between parent, teacher and school is the **recognition of parents in their parental role**. Each parent has unique knowledge about his/her child at home. That knowledge about a child's character, sensitivities, interests, talents ... are a great addition to your professional knowledge. As a teacher, you know the child in the classroom: how he/she behaves in group, how he/she deals with activities and appointments ... If the school can contribute both forms of knowledge in an equal way, parent and teacher become **full partners in the child's education**. Each from their own role and expertise.



"Sometimes it is hard to put yourself in the place of a particular family. Because your own family is completely different."



GETTING STARTED

BECOMING AWARE IS A PROCESS

Each of us has our own values/standards, things you think are quite normal. That makes us who we are, that makes us unique. Be aware that **everyone's frame of reference ('glasses') is different**; what is obvious for you is therefore not for someone else. E.g. eating together at the table, having a quiet place to do your homework, a mum/dad playing games,... So be careful with what seems 'obvious'!

"Parents need to be able to feel that I am here to listen to them. It's important to detach from what you think you know about the other, otherwise you won't get ahead."

BEING AWARE ALSO REQUIRES GIVING TIME

"One parent told me 'it took me a long time to confide in someone'. In that case, it is important to articulate that you understand that it is not obvious to them. What can we do together? That's how you create openness and trust."

LISTENING AND QUESTIONING WELL

*"Parents were given a sticker with their name and that of their child. I thought it was important **to listen carefully and ask through**: why is this so important to you? What do you mean by that? Did I understand that correctly? The parents thought the questioning was super. Sometimes, as a teacher, you feel that parents come to 'check up', but that is not the case. Parents mainly wanted to share information about their child, learn something and see their child busy in class. I also received many compliments, which was gratifying".*

"In essence, it's about understanding and being understood".

PICTURES AS A KEY TO CONTACT

The family wall is a good way to respect families as they are and recognise them in their uniqueness. By doing so, you learn as a school and strengthen the contact with child and parents
TIP: know that bringing a photo is not obvious for everyone. As a school, support where necessary.

www.kiddo.net/fotos-van-thuis-als-sleutel-tot-contact/100527





THE SCHOOL STEPS UP TO AND QUESTIONS PARENTS

Many parents want their toddler to get off to a good start, so that he or she is not excluded in the classroom - and later in the wider society. They want the very best for their child and see the school as a very important partner in this. So schools should not involve fathers and mothers, who are already involved with their child.

"There are many misconceptions about parental involvement: parents are indeed involved but how can you organise your school so that they also feel involved?"

It is best that the **schools do take the initiative to set up interaction and dialogue with parents**. After all, some parents approach the teacher more readily than others. The latter are best spoken to in order to lower the threshold. Just ask: "How are you today? A question serves to connect and from an open conversation you can pick up a lot. **Just because parents don't ask questions doesn't mean they don't have questions**. They take a step back because they don't want to question the system. But actually, they are usually keen to share experiences with their child's teacher. After a while, they will also dare to confide more to you and you will become true co-educators.

First look at the **existing contact moments**. **Who do you mainly reach and not reach?** Then, as a school, you can find out what is important to parents by setting up a **parent survey**. School teams do want more contact with parents, but often feel insecure. What if parents come into the classroom? What should I tell a parent? In addition to the parent survey, it is therefore good to **also survey the team** and identify their fears, resistances and questions. Then bring both perspectives together and discuss them at, say, a staff meeting or in a working group. For **many teachers**, as research has shown, this becomes a **positive experience**. One was amazed how parents had a lot of interest in the school and respect for the teachers. Above all, parents want to participate, to see their child engaged and is eager to learn.



"You set something in motion as a school, by questioning parents you get a much better relationship with them, they do dare to ask questions now."



GETTING STARTED

AN EXTENSIVE PARENTAL CONSULTATION

"We made a nice invitation, then sent a reminder. Parents came to watch their child in class and then went to the refectory for a group discussion. We had prepared some questions but let them go pretty quickly. Everything went smoothly, the different languages were not really a problem, parents help each other in this. Many parents stayed for a nice chat. We reached 75 % of the parents".

Of course, there are many other **ways to carry out such a parental survey**: by showing atmospheric photos of the school, working with videos on the day's activities, a play morning for parents and their children,... Choose something your school team feels comfortable with!

"A lot of meaningful input came out of the survey that the school can work with. We want to develop this system of questioning."

You can find all the concrete steps to get started with a parent consultation as a school in the book 'Warm Welcome and Reciprocal'.

CONSULTING/QUESTIONING MEANS ALSO: LISTEN GOOD DURING SMALL ENCOUNTERS

Every contact with a parent is a good time to question them: drop-off or pick-up moments, parent contacts, school gate moment, picking up when a parent says something, ...

We should make a policy of this, to capture those moments every time and ensure a constant reflex from the school team!



WHAT COMES AFTER THE CONSULTATION?

Parents like to know what the school has done with the survey, what you conclude as a school team and what actions come out of it. Be sure to provide **feedback** to parents. If parents know that their input is taken into account, they will feel even more positively involved in the school event.

TOPTIP: a beautiful flyer as an invitation!



CREATE BONDS BEFORE DIFFICULTIES ARISE

Sometimes it happens that contact with parents is only made when there is a problem. Then contact runs uncomfortably for both teacher and parent anyway. Moreover, when only problem communication is used, the management will receive more complaints and questions. To avoid this, it is essential to create a **positive atmosphere** between you and the parent in which connection is established by always talking about good things too. Then, when difficulties do arise, the basic trust is also there to discuss this openly.

"During the lunch break of the first days of school, I call all the parents of the youngest toddlers to tell them how their child is doing."

Thus, the corona crisis has also provided some schools with opportunities for growth in contacts with parents. Having a common 'enemy', being the virus, strengthened the bond well albeit with more physical distance.

"We noticed that families with whom we already had a good contact with before corona, were now easier to reach. One family we haven't reached yet, before corona there was little contact and now unfortunately that is completely gone."

An important way to create a bond of trust is to deploy **familiarisation programmes** for new children and their parents. The child and his/her parents can spend a few moments together in the classroom and experience the activities or rituals with them. The familiarisation process is a positive process to take away the pain of saying goodbye to mother and father. A sense of familiarity and security is installed for the child that does not disappear when the parents are gone. It is appropriate to bring in a care teacher, child supervisor or another staff member to look after the other children so that the teacher can also talk to the parents.



Through an introductory talk, the teacher learns more about the child's habits so that the two educational environments at home and school become a little more harmonised.

Teachers and parents are thus real co-educators of the child, each with their own knowledge and expertise. It is definitely worth looking 'over the wall' in childcare initiatives in your neighbourhood. They can help you in the topic of familiarisation.



GETTING STARTED

AN ELEMENTARY ATTITUDE IN ALL CONTACTS WITH PARENTS

Familiarisation **reduces stress** for children, parents and teachers. During familiarisation moments, we **learn from each other**. The parent sees what the teacher does with the children; at the same time, the teacher learns from the parent. For instance, seeing how a mother comforts her child can be valuable information for the teacher.

*"I welcome the parents of the youngest toddlers in the classroom **every month**, they first participate in a joint activity with the children. They may also take a seat in the circle moment so that they are **closely involved in classroom activities**. Afterwards, I show the corner activities. When all the children are playing, I make time for the parents and explain what is going on in the classroom, how the dining area works, the childcare, the meals in the classroom,... While the parents take another look around, I go back to them separately. Some parents find it pleasant to be addressed '**individually**'. They then dare to ask more. You see that parents primarily have questions around the care of their children. As a teacher (and mum) I have grown into this. I am also proud to be able to show my class and class events".*

*"In **corona times**, we still organised **individual familiarisation moments** with a remote class visit and mouth-masked conversation. It's too important not to."*

Familiarisation is good for each one involved! Every child and parent has different needs, being flexible is the message.





GIVING PRIORITY TO VERBAL CONTACTS

Parent surveys from different schools show that both parents and teachers want **more personal contact** with each other. Parents particularly desire more verbal communication. Only relying on written communication does not create a bond and rather results in alienation and distance from parents. However, written communication (e.g. letter, back-and-forth notebook, poster, leaflet,...) can be a supportive medium.

To create more opportunities for verbal contact, the school can deploy to receive parents in the classroom in the morning and/or afternoon. With a **fixed parent-child moment**, you can properly facilitate the home-school transition and emphasise 'parenting together'. This reassures the children, but also the parents. You also avoid the funnel effect whereby far too many parents have to drop their child off at the same place at the gate.

"We welcome parents into the classroom every morning. This requires some arrangements but the added value is really very high, both for the children, parents and teachers. Written communication and associated misunderstandings are less of an issue because of the investment in verbal contacts."

Formal parent meetings are also important moments to really engage in dialogue. The key question here is how to transform this moment from an information and communication moment to a reciprocal exchange. In corona times, some schools have certainly allowed formal parent meetings in the playground or online. The exceptional context provides the school with a valuable entry point to facilitate more two-way traffic. Simply starting already from the question, "how are you doing at home during these special times?", provided an interesting back-and-forth dynamic.



"During lockdown, when I went to the homes of the children, collecting some home work I'd given to them, I always tried to be present myself. That way I had time for a chat with the parents. The need to talk was great."



GETTING STARTED

Points of attention for low-threshold oral communication:

ACCESSABILITY

Good agreements make good friends: let parents know when you can/can't be reached and stick to it. Parents do not expect teachers to be reachable all the time. It is sometimes better to postpone a conversation for a while than to do it quickly.

"If you have a good relationship with the family, you can feel free to say: it doesn't fit now, but tomorrow I can make time."

Low literacy is a reality for some parents. Often, school terms and jargon that are **obvious** to us (class circle, reception, school guidance, ...) are **not always clear** to parents.

SMALL ENCOUNTERS

"We used to have a red line where parents had to stay behind. Now we receive parents in class every morning. That way there is opportunity for real conversations."

FACE TO FACE-CONVERSATION

*"After 2 online parent contacts, the last parent contact deliberately was live. Each teacher sat outside at a table with the necessary precautions. We **really wanted to see** our families again to hear how they were doing. That was a great success."*

PERSONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHILD

"We have a back-and-forth notebook with info about the class theme, songs ... But we find that **parents especially need info about their child**; does he eat well, does he play, does he have friends, does he feel good in class,... This is a focus for us."

VIDEO TIP 'KLASSE TV4

(Dutch) Movie, parents visiting a school in Aalst:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO4Alwe6HEc
(from minute 21.30)

KLASSE

De klas van juf Jelke





TACKLE LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Sometimes the language barrier also comes into play. However, do not fixate on language barriers, but try to transcend them by using hands and feet, enlisting the help of other parents or staff to translate or using visual support. Parents really appreciate you **trying to communicate** with them. Tell parents explicitly that they are allowed to interrupt you if they do not understand something. Be aware of the language you use and check that parents are on board with the conversation. With non-native-speaking parents, be careful with school terms or expressions such as 'to master something'. If not, the contact moment quickly becomes a stress situation for parents.

*"The parent survey taught us a lot about the ways we communicate. It showed, for instance, that people really appreciated the back-and-forth notebook and that they hardly read the school regulations (is long and difficult). I thought parents would ask to have the notes in their own language. But that is not the case at all. They really want to learn Dutch. But working with **pictograms and clear language** does help."*

A key principle is that all parents want the best for their child. For families newly arrived in Belgium or in Aalst, everything is new. Of course, people have their own context whence they come from. The reason for finding it harder to connect with the school is not culture-related per se, but rather has more to do with the search to find a place in society. If people do not connect immediately and do not feel at home in society, they also transfer that feeling to their children's school. In this sense, the school also has an important bridging function to society. It is also important to make sure we **take our time**. It is a long road. It is important to remain calm about it and not give up immediately.



"Plant a seed,
don't give up on people"



GETTING STARTED

ATTENTION TO THE USE OF LANGUAGE

- Avoid figurative language
- Use short active sentences
- Examples can be illuminating
- Structure in the conversation provides support
- Reading tip: communication methods with translation sheets



A translation sheet contains a basic message that each school gives to parents, in accessible Dutch and in 9 different languages. Sometimes it also includes a short film.

www.klasse.be/4472/meertalig-communiquer-met-ouders-met-vertaalfiches/

SOURCES

- Translation/interpreting: inquire about City options.
- Getting children to interpret is not a good idea; for practical information, it can be done.
- Perhaps there is a colleague who can help translate.
- Ask parents to bring someone from their own network to discuss discrete information.
- Icons are universal and highly visual. Use them in moderation; too much can be distracting. Diagrams and drawings explain just a little more.
- Use Google Translate and other apps only with active language, with figurative language these sources are not always reliable.
- Contact the City's Language Coach: taalcoach@aalst.be

Using tools can be helpful in communication; every meeting in Dutch can also be a practice opportunity for parents. Don't leave this out.



MAKING THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT

The words or jargon used by a school team are not always the words parents use or even understand (e.g. gym class, playtime, the school calendar, ...). What seems obvious to the school is not necessarily so to parents. If this is not clarified, many unnecessary misunderstandings arise which can result in frustrations, assumptions, indifference and even conflicts on both sides. It is therefore imperative that a school first and foremost becomes well aware of the implicit rules and agreements that the institution finds evident. Every institution has some kind of scenario, a script where every insider knows how things work. However, it is very difficult for outsiders or newcomers to figure out the expectations and rules. **Therefore, make implicit messages, expectations, rules, agreements, norms explicit.**

For instance, not all parents know what the purpose of a formal parent meeting is. So tell that and also say what you expect from parents. They often base their expectations on their own experiences. If you communicate openly, **fewer misconceptions** arise. Furthermore, it is important that parents feel at ease: offer them something to drink, for instance, and ask how they are doing. This hospitality invites them to talk openly about the child and to discuss unclear communication as well.

Conversely, it is also good to find out what exactly parents mean. Continued questioning and concretising open answers in a non-committal atmosphere (no cross-examination) gives you **more insight into what is going on** to avoid possible misunderstandings. For example, if parents state that they find it 'nice' to be in class, it is good to dig this out more. What is that nice, why do they like it and what does this say about what parents consider important and what they need?



"For some parents, the step to go to the teacher is big for fear they will not be understood. That's a shame that these opportunities to meet are lost."

"Our parent survey showed that our messages are not always clear to non-native parents. For example, we had a note that the child could bring a 'cuddly toy' to school tomorrow. Many children did not bring anything because the parents did not understand the word."



GETTING STARTED

'Kwinkslag' is a (Dutch) game with the aim of **experiencing for yourself what it feels like to enter a new environment with rules and habits as a newcomer**. It is a very powerful tool to experience 'first-hand' what it is like to face barriers at school.

EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

"We realise through this game that we need to make more time to explain rules and habits better. Now in the first preschool class it's like this, in the 2nd class it's different again. We are trying to get a line in that now."

"I understand better, when you get into a new unfamiliar situation, it can be frustrating sometimes. You don't know the rules, we need to be more aware of that in the school."

"I think it is also important to come to a consensus together in making rules and agreements. E.g. if certain needs/concerns of parents come back often (e.g. from parent surveys), how do you react? Do you dare to question your own rules?"

ACQUIRED INSIGHTS

- **Take time to clearly explain rules at school** to parents. Not just once, but repeatedly.
- Parents do not know our school rules, this can sometimes be frustrating, but we need to be mindful of it.
- People who seem to become indifferent or uninvolved: this sometimes has to do with not being familiar with the rules.
- Agreements are not made from an authoritarian stance, but one that radiates 'I want to help you'.



GETTING STARTED WITH THE GAME 'KWINKSLAG'

'Kwinkslag' can be loaned with or without accompaniment.

Contact Nele Buyl
Fourth World group People for People
053/78 36 60
nele@vierdewereldgroepaals.be



ATTENTION TO BOTH FATHERS AND MOTHERS

Fathers are parents too!

Whereas the 'uninvolved parent' is actually a myth, this is certainly true of the 'uninvolved father' or sometimes named as 'absent father'. The question is also to what extent that fathers feel addressed and have space in the school to be recognised as an important parenting figure and thus be able to participate in the school event. Even in our language to children, we tend to make more the reference to mother than father. Although the father is also very important to the child. Or fathers often get the message directly to pass something on to the mother. Thus, we see that in group activities, more mothers will participate. If planning individual parent contacts or talks, fathers will also participate more. With targeted group activities that go beyond talking and drinking coffee (e.g. chore day, sports activities), you increase the chances of reaching more fathers. The way to reach fathers is during drop-off and pick-up moments in the classroom. Proportionally there will always be as many fathers as mothers.

"On our facebook group, I see that both mothers and fathers are very active."

In your communication, your offer, and your daily contact, pay **specific attention** to that group. Especially during drop-off and pick-up moments, we can create more opportunities for dialogue. Be available and show attention to their environment. Furthermore, contact with the father is often forgotten. Fathers, grandparents or other family members are just as interested and partners in a child's development and upbringing.



"Isn't this logical, is it necessary to have a key for this separately? On the other hand, we also see that with divorced parents, for example, we deal very consciously with making sure both parents feel addressed. In that sense, it does make it interesting to see if we address and value both mothers and fathers in their parental roles."



GETTING STARTED

FOCUS ON FATHERS FROM THE TEACHERS' POINT OF VIEW

"In my poster and flyer, there are always equal numbers of mums and dads. I think it's important that I address the whole family."

"Because I sometimes also address and involve fathers, I find that the kids like that too."

"My activities are alternately aimed at mums and dads. Everyone can show their talents".

"It took a long time to get this dad into the classroom, but once he was there, the ice was broken. This dad himself now dares to step up to me."

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD

Consciously and unconsciously, we can **strengthen families' social network**. By 'social network' we mean the people with whom the child has an enduring relationship. Of course, not only the relationship is important, but also its nature: the degree of connection, people with whom the child experiences safety and love. Not every family has the same profile, just think of the many compositions we know (father and mother, single mothers, single fathers,...).



OUDEPARTICIPATIE

OOK VOOR VADERS!

Hoe kan je vaders betrekken bij kinderopvang?

© VBKP, PBO Stedelijk Ouder, Huis voor Ouder, 2006



PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT, ALSO FOR FATHERS

Reading tip: in this (Dutch) brochure you will find a tool to get started with father participation, a self-assessment to see where you stand today and a lot of practical tips to get fathers more actively involved.

www.vbjk.be/files/attachments/.824/handleiding_Ouderparticipatie_ook_voor_vaders.pdf



INCREASING THE NUMBER OF DOORS

To reach so many parents, it is important as a school to **differentiate communication methods or parent activities**. You cannot do the same thing for everyone. Not everyone is the same. And you won't reach everyone with one way of contacting them. This also very much depends on the population of your school: which ways of contact work best for the diversity of mothers and fathers? Ask the parents themselves about this. They will be able to give you a lot of useful input.

In addition to well-known parent activities (info moment, school party, parent contact, etc.), you can also focus on **small, informal contacts** that can take place every day between parents and teachers. This contains many opportunities to build high-quality relationships with all parents. Not just parents in socially vulnerable situations. Also in corona times, depending on their population, schools have made a more **digital shift**. Through facebook, messenger, online platform, ... they created opportunities for contact and connection with parents. For some parents, this proved to work very well and teachers were surprised that parents were very engaged. For other parents, online communication is not the way because, for example, they cannot use social media or have difficulties in using the internet. Again, the message here is to differentiate sufficiently in ways of communication.

Some schools have also **literally created more doors** in the school to accommodate parents. For example, one school has created two entrances, one for preschoolers and one for primary school children. This ensures that fewer parents have to be in the same place at the same time, thus creating better conditions for contacts between teachers and parents. In another school, all parents could (before the corona crisis) bring their child to the preschool class in person. This avoided a funnel effect at the school gate.



"After the many pavement visits, I can say I know my parents better, I can now better place why children are sometimes not okay. I saw a lot of poverty behind the facades."



AAN DE SLAG

The lockdown challenged schools to be creative; different ways were used to reach all parents:

'PHYSICAL' ENTRANCES

*"By creating a separate entrance for the toddlers, drop-off and pick-up moments were much calmer. Parents found **space to have a chat** with the teacher and with each other."*

THE SCHOOL PAYS A HOME VISIT

*"During the lockdown, I made home work in bundles and brought them to all pupil's homes every week. At first, **I felt a barrier** to do this, also because I know that such a 'pavement visit' does not feel safe for everyone. I made time for a chat with parent and child so most really looked forward to our visit. We are going to build home visits into the school operation as standard."*

ONLINE

*"We work with an **online preschool platform** and are thinking of abolishing it because many parents do not read the messages. There could be many reasons why people don't use it."*

*"During corona, I had a lot of contact with parents through Messenger. It is an **additional communication tool** and I will continue to use it even after corona. I reach more families now."*

BOOK TIP

(Dutch) Brochure from parents' associations with key points of focus to engage all parents. The focus is 'action': how does your attitude influence conversations? What makes parents feel welcome? Which activities are appropriate? The brochure includes practical examples, interviews, testimonials and materials.

<https://www.koogo.be/sites/default/files/pdf/Hoe-nemen-we-alle-ouders-mee.pdf>



Hoe nemen we alle ouders mee?

Een brochure voor ouderwerkingen, ouderraden en schoolteams.



FORGING LINKS WITH PARTNERS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

As a school, you are not alone in these challenges in building a good parent-school collaboration. For one thing, you can **look 'over the wall'** and exchange or visit other schools and childcare centres. How do they approach their parents and develop a familiarisation policy?

"We went with the whole team to see a school that organises a warm welcome moment. That really triggered something in some colleagues; there was immediate enthusiasm to do it the same way at our school!"

At **childcare centres**, a warm welcome policy is woven into their DNA. Inspiring for schools! As a school, working more closely with childcare initiatives gives you extra inspiration.

"Cooperation with childcare centres is a strength. You can start earlier in building contact with families."

On the other hand, you can also seek help from **welfare and community organisations, or professionals who have experience in working with parents**. They are well placed to offer insights on vulnerability factors among parents. In every region, the picture looks different. Each partner has valuable expertise: low-threshold work with parents, constructively dealing with diversity, with poverty ... The school can look for allies in these organisations who are willing to share their experience and expertise.



In Aalst, for example, you can visit the **KOALA project** (Kind-en OuderActivities voor Lokale Armoedebestrijding). KOALA offers accessible meeting places for parents and their young children (0-3 years), so that children who do not attend childcare can also meet other children, play together, etc. KOALA also increases the accessibility of childcare and organises child-parent activities together. KOALA is currently active in the Mijlbeek neighbourhood, but the ambition is to spread the idea across the city.



GETTING STARTED

COLLABORATION IS STRENGTHENING

A number of schools from the track have a **nice partnership with a childcare initiative:**

- One school works closely with a neighbourhood childcare centre. Every month, the teacher takes the preschool class with the youngest toddlers to the childcare centre and they read a book or play TIK TAK together. Conversely, children of the centre also comes to the preschool class, they explore the big playground, ... Parents are also invited, so that they too experience a warm transition to school.
- Another school and childcare centre are on the same campus so there is even closer cooperation. There is coordination around themes and activities, e.g. involving the childcare centre in the school festival,... In this way, the childcare centre becomes the so-called '10th class' of the school!



The **KOALA-project** also works around the warm transition from home or childcare to preschool. During the meeting moments, we check with parents whether they have chosen a school for their child, what the importance of preschool education is, etc. KOALA would like to work on this **with schools in the Mijlbeek district**, e.g. by organising an activity with the teacher of the youngest class for parents and children who are already enrolled but are too young to start. A nice get-to-know-you moment as a stepping stone to a warm transition on the very first school day.

It is inspiring to think **with other schools** about how to work on parent involvement and warm transition to school. Schools interested can contact the Fourth World People for People group
(Nele Buyl - 053/ 78 36 60 - nele@vierdewereldgroepaalt.be).



THINKING AND ACTING WITH THE TEAM

How do you turn this quest of parent-school collaboration into a team fact? It is not so obvious, you really have to have to go for it. Again, look at the context of the school. At one school, it will be important to involve the whole team from the first step. At another school, it might be better to try out a few small things with a few teachers first and then share the experiences with the whole team. It is important that each school assesses what is **needed for the team**.

"We started by having parents from the class with the youngest toddlers come into the classroom at drop-off and pick-up times. We then extended this to the other preschool classes."

Some points of interest:

- It is important to **inform** the whole team about the project, so everyone knows what you are working on. Do this regularly so the team can grow into it, hopefully take it on board => give it a place in team meetings.
- Get the team on board by **sharing successes** with them (e.g. parent consultation, action coming into the classroom,...) - make clear what the added value is for child, parent but also for the teachers themselves.
- How to link **action and thinking/visioning**? You can't have one without the other.
- Once something does not immediately succeed, **evaluate it well together** and do not immediately abolish it. Some actions should also be given a chance and enough trial time.

So professionalising the team also means **providing safety, so that those thresholds become negotiable**, so that they are not just seen as a burden but as a challenge.



"If teachers are feeling down for a while, it is important to give them some time and breathing space to process. Although you may not let go."



GETTING STARTED

CONCRETE ACTIONS ON PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION WITH THE SCHOOL TEAM

- A **parent-school working group** (with management, care teacher, teachers) that acts as an engine to bring the whole team along is a must. Do this step-by-step; question parents, work with the team to find parents' needs. Think about what connects you to parents, where are similarities. If it becomes clear that we are going for the same thing together, you will get your team more involved. Remember to regularly check off with parents.

"As a teacher, bringing in your own perspective as a parent or grandparent adds value to connecting with the parent. Every child is someone's child."

- Look for **external support** to inspire the school team. We as Fourth World Group People for People set up intervision processes with schools and offers support on the school floor.
More info? Nele Buyl - 053/ 78 36 60 - nele@vierdewereldgroepaalst.be.
- **Start** building a welcoming policy **in the youngest preschool class** and then expand to the entire primary school.

"A new vision around formal parent meetings requires discussion and brainstorming moments in the team, alignment with parents. There are schools that have decided, for example, to invite parents into the classroom. Such a revolution involves trial and error, but certainly also moments of success."



LEESTIP

Check the book 'Warm, welcome and reciprocal'



MAKING TIME AN ALLY

Just as Rome was not built in a day, this is also the case for building a good parent-school partnership. This cannot be done by a few occasional actions. It takes time to **develop with the team a shared vision and actions**. Let it grow from the bottom up: one teacher does it, another wants to do it too. That's how you get an oil-spill effect. If you are positive and constructive about it, you will get many to join you!

Take time to let things grow. Teachers also need to get used to the idea that we work with parents at school. But sometimes, as a headmaster, you also have to say 'now we are going to do it' because it fits into the school's mission/vision. If you never try it, then you don't know whether it works. If you try it, then again there are people who get excited about it.

Schools indicate that, even in corona times, they have maintained contact with parents as much as possible. In some schools, contact has even become closer as a result of this crisis. **However great the commitment of the team, also work with parents step by step, so that they too are given time to work more and more intensively with the school.**



"We had a lot of work reaching out to children and parents during the lockdown. We had a lot of daily contact with parents, we sometimes went to the door, teachers emailed daily. It got off to a bit of a slow start but it was worth the time investment. 98% of the children we continued to reach in one way or another. This is where we are proud of the school team."



GETTING STARTED

INVEST IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

- Engaging in **informal conversations** is essential to build and maintain trust. It ensures that a relationship is built before there are difficulties to discuss.

"Very early on in the school year, I see parents who come quickly to me. Parents who I feel I cannot reach that easily; I try to address them regularly at the school gate."

- You also work on the relationship with parents during the **formal parent meeting**. This meeting is not just to send information, it is also an opportunity to engage in dialogue and listen to the parent's needs regarding the school and their children.

"You need a lot of energy to gain trust from parents. They have to get used to so much. It is my experience that if I have the parents along, the children are along too."

- Trust takes time** and you don't always see immediate results. One teacher reaps the benefits of the previous year's teacher investment.

Teacher 1: "I'm surprised that x's mum does come to you now. Last year I tried so much; she only came to the last parent meeting."

Teacher 2: "She comes to me now just because you worked so hard on that."



VIDEO TIP: OVER THE LINE

A film about the transition to kindergarten of 3 children in different locations. Together with their parents, children are given time and space to discover their new classroom and school context. Inside and outside the school walls, different employees work together to achieve this: they convince parents and each other to give each child a good start.

With English subtitles.
<https://vimeo.com/23817068>

SCHOOLS SPEAK OUT



How do participating schools look back on the process they went through during the peer review? How did they get started? What are they still dreaming about? We would like to let some schools have their say:

"Already during the 2017-2018 school year, we noticed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to reach and involve parents in school events. We organised a team survey and shortly afterwards received the offer to join the 'Parent involvement in transition' project. The ideal moment to start looking for possible solutions based on our needs, starting with the transition from home or childcare centre to preschool.


*The input and enrichment during the intervision moments contributed to **critical reflection and the formulation of a concrete action plan**. The examples cited and shared provided the ideal inspiration. This action plan was and still is the basis for our work on parent participation.*

*The **initial core team**, consisting of the preschool teacher, care teacher, care coordinator and headmaster, was expanded to include colleagues from the primary school. In this way, the focus of this project is extended throughout the entire primary school. The familiarisation moments for toddlers, the commitment to 100% attendance during formal parent meetings, the extensive questioning of new parents about their findings during the first school year,... have become fixed items within our school activities.*

*The tools and insights provided give us the necessary inspiration to actively get to work on this. **Today more than ever, school-parent collaboration is one of the foundations of quality education!** The course followed was certainly a great added value in this!"*

*"Because of corona, everything gained a bit of momentum at school. Through the weekly pavement visits, we got to **know our parents better**. We have now really incorporated those **pavement visits/home visits into our school operation** and visit our families at the beginning of the school year. At the same time, we are also dreaming of the time after corona: we would like to continue our daily drop-off in the preschool class, we are really looking forward to this!"*



A woman wearing a black hijab and glasses is smiling and looking towards a group of young children in a classroom. The children are sitting at a table, and one child in the foreground is smiling broadly. There is a green plastic bin and some toys on the table.

Inspiratieboek voor kleuteronderwijs

Warm, welkom en wederkerig

Naar een goede
ouder-schoolsamenwerking

BOOK TIP

The basis of the intervision programme is the book 'Warm, welcome and reciprocal'. **In this book you will find a detailed explanation on how to get started with all the keys in this brochure.** We therefore choose to keep this brochure concise and only include tips and good practices from Aalst. If you want to get started with the theme, you should read both the book and our Aalst brochure.

See elsewhere on this website for an English version.



You can find the book elsewhere on this website. The Dutch version can be found at <https://vbjk.be/nl/publicaties/warm-welkom-wederkerig> or pick it up at Fourth World Group People for People Sinte Annalaan 41/02 - 9300 Aalst - 053/ 78 36 60 - nele@vierdewereldgroepaalst.be

The Fourth World People for People group sets up intervision processes with schools and provides support on the school floor. More info? Get in touch!

THIS PUBLICATION

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Stad Aalst



Photo credit © VBJK - Caroline Boudry

DEVOTED SCHOOLS DEVOTED PARENTS

12 keys for a sound parent-school collaboration



1. Start with the elementary: smiles, goodbyes and respect
2. Taking families as they are, where they are
3. School steps up to and questions parents
4. Create bonds before difficulties arise
5. Giving priority to verbal contacts
6. Tackling language barriers
7. Making the implicit explicit
8. Attention to both fathers and mothers
9. Increasing the number of doors
10. Forging links with partners in the neighbourhood
11. Thinking and acting from the team
12. Making time an ally

More information

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**ZET EEN
PUNT ACHTER
ARMOEDE!**