

Inspirational book for preschool education

Warm, Welcome and Reciprocal.

Towards a good
parent-school collaboration.



MANIFESTO

From Parental Involvement to Parent-School Collaboration

At the end of the AMIF project, we asked all participants to write down what they stand for, what their vision of parent-school collaboration is. From their input and the conversation that followed, we wrote a manifesto that brings together their acquired insights in one text. It is both the final piece of the project and an appeal to preschools to be inspired by it.

- 1 In a parent-school collaboration, **reciprocity** is central for us. Parents and school are **partners** who can strengthen, question and value each other. **Dialogue** is therefore very important and also allows for discussion and contradiction. Working on **mutual trust** is the starting point.
- 2 We listen to **parents' voices** so that we can properly grasp their needs and concerns. We assume that good parent-school collaboration leads to an **increased quality** of our school functioning. By asking parents the core question, "is this school a good place for my child?", we are challenged to **question our obvious-seeming systems**.
- 3 All actors - the child, the parent, the teacher, the school team, partner organisations - are included in an **empowering process**. We see **empowerment** in the interest of each of these actors and not just as a function of parents living in socially vulnerable circumstances.
- 4 Working towards parent-school collaboration is an ongoing and **dynamic process**. The outcome is not predetermined, the search inspires. In this process we learn to listen well, to question each other well, to deal with the diversity of opinions, perceptions... After all, everyone can contribute expertise from his/her role or function.
- 5 In this we do not stand alone but are **supported** by our alliance with neighbourhood, integration and welfare organisations. Privileged partners are the **childcare and preventive family support institutions, services and organisations**. Cooperation with them represents added value.
- 6 Together with **these partners**, we strive for the well-being and wellbeing of children and their families and work towards a rightful place for everyone in society. By focusing on **meetings and interconnections** between the various actors, we contribute to better **social cohesion** in (local) society.
- 7 For all these principles, it is up to us, school staff, to take the **initiative**, to take the first steps towards parents towards a stronger parent-school collaboration.

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2

The voice of parents

“We don’t know much about parents, and that often creates prejudices. We sometimes draw conclusions that could be wrong. It would be good if we got to know the parents better. That way we can get rid of prejudices, which can create a more relaxed atmosphere.”

(teacher)

Parents and school share a common goal: maximum developmental opportunities for children. Any study of what constitutes good parent-school collaboration argues that all actors involved share that same goal. Already a solid foundation for a good collaboration.

Since both parents and schools are key players to realize this goal, cooperation, consultation, dialogue and clear communication are obviously very important. The more parents and school can strengthen each other, be in line with each other, the greater the chance that the school career will start well - and can be successful. That foundation is laid in the very first days, weeks and years: in preschools.

But how do you find out what those parents are thinking, where their doubts and questions, concerns and thresholds lie? What makes them happy, and what makes their eyebrows furrow or their hearts pound? The answer is deceptively simple: ask them. In this chapter, we focus on how to do that, question parents, and what a thousand blooming flowers this can lead to, how fruitful this process can be if you do it thoughtfully.

Why ask questions to parents

Building a reciprocal collaboration with parents requires a school to create space for **parents' perspectives**. You invite them to share their needs, concerns and expectations and can develop your approach accordingly. That is how you build a trusting relationship with parents. Especially in preschool, building trust is crucial. After all, this is where you lay the foundation for the rest of the school career and parent-school collaboration.

Preschool teachers humbly admit that they like to be **quick to act**. That is a wonderful attitude but here we would dare to advise to take a step back and think before you act. The experiences of the pilot projects in fact show that actions aimed at better parent-school cooperation produce good results if they are based on what comes from **asking questions to parents**. In other words, by moving quickly into action mode without responding to what parents think is important and indicate as concerns, you can cut corners a little too quick and your actions could lack sufficient support. So take your time and talk to parents, find out exactly what you want to find out from them and only then roll up your sleeves.

All pilot projects also asked questions to **teachers** at the same time. This obviously leads to even stronger support for actions. These dialogues show that parents are concerned and insecure (have care questions) but at the same time teachers are also insecure and anxious about what parents (do not) want. So both sides have specific **perceptions** about each other that are not always correct. Bridging the gap of perceptions is then a necessary condition for a good relationship of trust and ensures a beginning of cooperation.

Questioning parents can seem time-consuming but is an investment that pays off handsomely. Creating time and space to listen to parents openly and honestly and to reflect critically on the sense (and nonsense) of certain actions pays off. It helps to be focused, effective and reciprocal.

“I used to blame parents when they weren’t there at an activity. Now I wonder more why they’re not there. We assume too much ‘they don’t want to’, but maybe there are other reasons: no time, didn’t understand the question... We need to look at this differently. Maybe we should see parent involvement less as organizing activities, but more as a good relationship with parents.” (preschool teacher, Mechelen)

Organising separate interviews also make sense because you cannot expect (all) parents to spontaneously address school staff about their concerns and insecurities. After all, research shows that parents are often very **shy to ask questions**.

“I went to school in Belgium, that makes it easier for me. For parents who did not go to school here, it is much more difficult to know what is expected of them.” (parent)

“Some people are too scared or too embarrassed to talk to the teacher. It very much depends on whether the person is social. But it’s also important if the teacher or the principal are friendly, if they can understand you or if they are angry when you ask something and they think, ‘oh, every day she asks something’. But this teacher always smiles and is always friendly, she always says how my child is doing and that’s very nice for me.” (parent)

For many reasons, parents do not (quickly) take the step to **communicate concerns** to teachers or to ask what exactly is expected. Respect for the teacher as a professional sometimes still creates a form of distance. Parents who do not speak sufficient Dutch do not always dare to express themselves. Or the circumstances create **small thresholds**, for example a group of teachers who talk among themselves on the playground, busy moments at pick-up and drop-off... And some parents do not dare express their concerns, for fear that the school will perceive it as criticism.

“A while ago our child had a big scratch on her face. I was worried about this and wanted to know what had happened. But I didn’t dare ask the teacher because I thought she was going to think that I considered her to be a bad teacher. But I did want to know. The teacher didn’t come to me to say anything about it then either. I still don’t know now what really happened.” (parent)

It is not because parents do not ask questions, they do not have questions. It is therefore up to the school to take the **initiative** to find out what is on parents' minds and how they experience (the transition to) preschool.

“So for parents, such an interview can be quite an exciting event: ‘someone is going to ask me what I think of the school’. Therefore, explain well what the intention is, what will or will not happen with the results of the interviews, what the follow-up is. Extensive reassurance is therefore necessary.”
(Stéphanie, Community Building Organisation Mechelen)



2

Parents' voice as action

So your 'first action' if you want to build a good parent-school collaboration is... to dialogue with parents. How you approach this requires some preparation. Which parents do we want to ask questions to? How do we approach that? Do parents dare talk to us openly? What about trust? Is repeated large-scale questioning necessary or can we create conditions in our daily moments with parents that encourage exchange? We explore the following in this section:

- - what do you ask
- - how to ask questions,
- - who asks the questions,
- - feedback.

2.1 What do you ask?

The themes and topics you ask depend on the parents: are they new to the school or have they known the school for several years? Concerning new parents, you may want to hear mainly how they and their child experienced the transition from home or childcare to preschool. Because you may think that as a school you realise a warm transition, the test is hearing what parents have to say about it and how they (and their children) experience it. Topics of questions include:

- - the registration and 'sight seeing tour' in the school
- - the familiarization moment
- - the first day(s) of school
- - contact with the teacher(s) and other school staff members
- - the information provided
- - whether there was/is an opportunity to ask questions
- - the practical info about what to put in the backpack,, meals...
- - whether you have insight into what happens in the classroom
- - how your child reacts at home during the transition
- -...

“We have chosen to ask questions concerning transition to pre-school in a chronological order: from school choice to enrollment and school entry. I started with the moment of enrollment: ‘why did you choose this school’, ‘how did the enrollment go’, ‘did you have contact with the school between enrollment and the first day of school’. Basically I kept asking the question, ‘what was it like for you’, ‘how did you feel at the time’, ‘was that exciting, difficult’? So I focused on the perception of the parents.” (Stéphanie, Community Building Organisation, Mechelen)

2.2

How do you question?

Regular questioning methods such as surveys and online questionnaires are an option but do not always deliver the hoped-for results. The pilot projects have experimented with other types of surveys: **one-on-one interviews** at school, at parents’ homes or other places where parents feel safe and secure, **group or focus interviews** with small groups of parents together (whether or not during an activity that is already planned, e.g., a parent café). So see what is the most appropriate option for your parents, your goal and within your context.

One-on-one interviews have the advantage of building in a degree of safety.

“Parents shouldn’t be afraid of ‘ooh-wee, I’m going to ask a stupid question here among all the other parents’. They can answer without inhibitions.” (Celien, preschool teacher Vlamschool, Menen)

With parents who are less easy to reach and therefore you want to get to know them a little better, you can consider having an individual conversation. That creates more room to discuss complex or delicate matters. In a group discussion, make sure that every parent has a chance to speak. Small variations: splitting parents into small subgroups, possibly per language, individual talks...

— **Points of attention:**

- - Invite the parents personally.
- - Allow enough time.
- - Provide translation, you want to question every parent.
- - Work with a guideline, a questionnaire that you have prepared.
- - Think about tools that get the conversation going: floor plan and pictures of (parts of) the school, pictures of teachers, etc.
- - Consider providing childcare for the children they bring.



Focus groups

Ann-Sofie and Pat,
Educational Network
Antwerp

“In Antwerp-Kiel we chose not to interview parents individually but in **focus groups** in each of the four schools involved. We wanted to find out from fathers and mothers if and how they feel involved in their child going to school. How do they view the school’s parent policy? What is the strength of the school? What effect does that have on them? How do they feel about that? How can the school and other intermediary organisations (e.g., childcare center, children’s house, community based family support service) accommodate parents differently? Depending on the school’s identity, some topics were covered more or less extensively.

In advance, we checked with the school some practical matters such as: number of parents, possibly catering and childcare, whether translation is provided. For the focus groups we worked with **pictures**, for example a photo of a child saying goodbye to mommy or daddy, children playing in the classroom or in the sports hall, a parent talking to the teacher, a moment of information, what children learn at school...

We used the following **guide** for the conversation.

Warm-up - How do you feel in the school in general? How is the atmosphere between teachers/childcare workers and parents, and between parents themselves? Do you feel welcome here?

At child level - familiarisation, daily contact, key moments (including parent contact).


Parent activities - about the activities, contact with the teacher and/or childcare worker, parents among themselves,...

At the school organizational level - about helping/thinking/deciding at school, info about pedagogical policies,...

In the neighbourhood - whether the school participates in or sets up actions in the neighbourhood

Closing - additions, additional thoughts and suggestions?”

Visual support for conversations



Lia and Heidi,
Educational Centre
Ghent

“Supporting parents in their school choice was our focus in the interviews. Our focus in interviewing parents was: guidance when they have to make a **school choice**. This was experienced as a difficult tangle for both parents with societally disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds. Especially parents who enroll their child in a preschool for the first time risk getting lost in this. Making questions concrete and visualizing them can help give parents words and perspectives to express their own needs and expectations.

When asked how they felt about choosing a school, different A4 papers with different words of emotions, in various languages, were hung on the wall. Participants could indicate which feeling they had experienced.

When asked how they felt about their child starting school soon, they could indicate this via a **thermometer**.

We also worked with **pictures** to create a visual image of, for example, a refectory (What is this? Do the little ones eat with the big ones?) or a playground (“When it rains, do they play outside?”).

Parents can bring along these kinds of questions, which they may not have thought of beforehand, on a school visit. In this way, they feel empowered in their search for a good school for their children.”

2.3. Who asks questions?

— Let's do a little self-examination first:

- - If school staff (e.g., teachers) themselves ask questions to parents, will parents answer the questions freely and honestly?
- - What barriers would they experience: out of respect not wanting to express critical reservations? fear of consequences for their child? Linguistic barriers?...
- - Is there a culture in our school - and do we express it - that can give parents the feeling they can give us (critical) opinions?
- - Is it actually up to the teacher of the parents' child to ask the questions?
- - If this is not desirable or feasible, why is this so? What prevents us from doing this ourselves? How do we grow to a climate where we can?
- - Who in the school is best placed then, is close enough to the parents, has a more neutral position if necessary?
- - If we should look for an external partner for interviewing parents: in which facility or organisation do the parents trust, who is close to the parents?
- - Does this organisation also have the expertise to set up such a dialogue? Can they possibly coach us so that we can take this over later?
- - ...

What we know from research - and also from the results of the dialogues conducted by the pilot projects - is that **parents prefer to talk to the person who matters to them**, namely the teacher of the class where their children are. This is best done when this teacher - and by extension: the entire team - installs an atmosphere where the parent feels comfortable answering questions. In that sense, 'wanting to question parents' is a great reason to examine your **school culture**.

'Bringing in the perspective of parents' also requires some **experience and expertise**. This is another reason why it can be good to engage an **external partner** who is both close to parents and has that expertise. The pilot projects have often worked with external partners such as Community Building Organisation, an educational center or network, an organization working with families with young children, an association with experience in working with specific vulnerable groups, a University College,...

— **Advantages of using external partners:**

- Parents initially tend to bring a positive affirmative story. Attention to deepen the conversations is important to reveal better areas of concern and improvement.
- The external partner does not start from an overly detailed knowledge of education, so he or she can take some distance from that and is less inclined to be defensive when faced with critical reservations.
- The external partner can ask more sharply the ‘why’ question, can more easily question the taken for granted elements’ of education.
- If the external partner can also coach the school team in this, this is a form of professionalisation in thinking about and working with parents.

2.4 **Feedback**

After the results of the interviews with the parents have been listed and discussed within the school team (see also below), it is important to inform the interviewed parents themselves what happened with the interviews, how this has been followed up, how the teachers reacted, what actions will result from it, which will not (and why), etc. Nothing frustrates more, as anyone who has already been surveyed knows, than ‘not hearing anything about the results’.

So aftercare through **thoughtful feedback** is key to achieving your goal of building a relationship of trust with parents.

“I talked to the parents to explain what happened with the interviews and how teachers responded to them. Those were actually the most enjoyable home visits I’ve ever done. You can tell parents: ‘Thanks in part to you, this is going to happen or change’. Especially when parents had already noticed that something had already changed, that they were already allowed to come to the classroom door, for example.”
(Stéphanie, Community Building Organisation Mechelen)

So the feedback can provide nice additional (side) effects.

“Was there an impact of the feedback on parents? Yes, with parents who dared to say something for the first time during such a conversation, I notice that I hear them more often afterwards - during a parent meeting or a class moment. I know one seemingly shy parent who was able to say what was bothering her. The principal immediately responded that she was very glad she had said it and that the principal had never looked at it that way. The fact that the school recognized her concern and took action made that parent much less shy afterward.” (Jamâa, staff member at the parent-counselling organisation De Schoolbrug, Antwerp)

Dialoguing with parents is indirectly an **acknowledgement** that you take them seriously, that you recognize the parent as an expert about his or her child, especially if you also give feedback afterwards. By doing so, you send the message, ‘we want to take care of your child together with you’. After all, each parent has unique knowledge about his/her child. That knowledge about a child’s character, sensitivities, interests and talents are a nice complement to what the teacher knows and sees: how the child behaves in group, how he/she handles assignments and agreements... If the school can bring in both forms of knowledge in an **equal way**, parent and teacher become full partners in the child’s education.



What do we learn from this?

3.1 The results

— What does it do to a team?

It takes some time for teachers to take in the results of in-depth interviews with parents. So it is advisable to distinguish ‘first impressions’ from ‘and what do we learn from this? in a caring manner’.

“With parents, the main result was: ‘I want to know what my child is doing in class, I want to know how they feel!’ Our first reaction was, ‘oh no, parents in the classroom!’ We already have such a hard time with the kids, let alone having to include parents’. We hadn’t yet realized that by bringing them into the classroom, this could also help us.” (Kim, preschool teacher De Buurt, Brussels)

“In the past, we were sometimes harsh in our judgment of parents, especially when ‘again, few showed up’. By questioning parents, we learned to see that parents do have their worries and limitations, work in shifts, didn’t go to school themselves, sometimes have no food in the house, have one swimsuit that the children then have to share, and so on. We did not know the poverty situations of our families. We are in our own middle-class world and have little feeling for other living conditions.” (Kathleen, preschool teacher De Ham, Mechelen)

The common thread in the in-depth interviews/focus groups set up by the pilot projects is: parents are extremely **curious** about what is happening in the classroom and at school. Moreover, they are very positive and speak with great **respect** about the teachers in their role as professional educators. This partly came as a surprise to some school teams, precisely because they had a different perception of parents. Teams were also genuinely amazed at how involved mothers and fathers are in the education of their children. So giving these positive evaluations and reflections from parents to teachers, works very motivating.

“After the summer, we took some quotes from the interviews and showed them in the teacher’s room. I think this is gratifying to teachers anyway: ‘yes, is that how we are talked about and are they so pleased with us?’ That does give a boost.” (Miranda, Vives University College)

— **What questions and concerns do parents have?**

It is quite impossible to include the results from all the interviews in this book. We pick some important insights. The majority of parents feel a great need for more **contact and exchange** about their child at school.

“I do not always want to wait for a formal parent-teacher meetings to speak with the teacher. Parent-teacher meetings are important, but I want more, just contact.” (parent)

“In the late afternoon there is no possibility to speak to the teacher: there is little time, it all has to go very quick, you disturb the other parents who are waiting. Too bad: you can’t ask what my child did, how the day went, if there was anything difficult. We find it important to know more about how our child is doing. It’s too bad that we have to wait until this formal meeting to find out.” (parent)

“My child does not understand Dutch. How long does it take for a child to feel comfortable, to feel at home? What does the school do to make the child feel comfortable?” (parent)

“Because of the interviews, we teachers now realize better that parents do need contact. From ‘they don’t come and ask anything, so they don’t need contact’ this has evolved into a broader view of parents.” (Charlotte, preschool teacher Tovertuin, Willebroek)

At the same time, parents are reassured when contact creates a form of **reciprocal dialogue**.

“I was very worried about my child because she didn’t speak yet and was very closed. I didn’t know how the teacher was going to deal with that. The teacher was able to reassure me well. I was also able to give many tips to the teacher, which was good. I know she took my tips into account.” (parent)

Parents experience **barriers**, such as school practices, implicit norms and routines, when they want a good dialogue.

“Now you disturb the teachers, kids coming out and the other parents if you want to say something. You then either have to be pushy, or wait until everyone is gone, especially if you want to say something or ask something that is actually somewhat private.” (parent)

“When I come to pick up my child, the teacher talks about what didn’t go well in class. I would also like it when she says when something went nice/good. There is a lot of difference between the teachers though. When picking up, with some it is just ‘mommy is there!’ without saying anything to me. I would like it if they say something about what they did during the day.” (parent)

As also indicated in the introductory chapter, parents of toddlers are left with questions and insecurities concerning – according to their perception – the limited physical and emotional care that the school offers their child.

“On the first day, the class teacher was not on the playground. That was unfortunate. We already knew her from the first school days and it would be nice to have her there at that first day. I like to see when the supervision teacher takes care of my child, taking him by the hand when he is crying.” (parent)

Parents also sometimes experience **thresholds within themselves** because they are shy, lack language skills or do not know what is expected of them.

“When parents are invited into the school, for example to gymnastics, I don’t go here. I am still too shy for this because my Dutch is not good enough yet. I still have to get over this, I know I’m welcome and that’s nice. But not yet, later.” (parent)

— What does a team do with these results?

Again, we cannot provide an overview of the actions that resulted from the questioning. A general observation is that the actions teachers take as a result of the questioning, tend to be **relatively small changes** that can be implemented fairly quickly and respond to parents’ expressed concerns. What can at least be said is that a **greater understanding of parents’ perspectives**

has emerged and taken for granted issues in school organisation are being questioned.

“They realized that some of the concerns of parents were not entirely unjustified. They did understand where it was coming from.” (Kathleen, preschool teacher De Ham, Mechelen)

“The parents would actually like to come to school but not only through the ways we offer. Looser, freer, less controlled.” (Celien, preschool teacher Vlamschool, Menen)

Teachers and child supervisors generally do want more contact with parents, but they too often feel **insecure**. Confronting teachers with parents’ perspectives can invalidate those assumptions.

“Our teachers found these questionings to be a good thing. They realised it’s not ‘us against them’. We got responses like, ‘waw, actually parents do look at our school with quite a positive eye’. (Kathleen, preschool teacher De Ham, Mechelen)

“What I myself noticed when we presented the results was: the team was surprised that parents are also quite positive about the school. I think there was an idea within the team that ‘those parents don’t want to, don’t feel like it, don’t want contact with us’. And when we brought in: ‘but they are actually very satisfied with the school and would like more contact’, it was like ‘oh!’” (Miranda, Vives University College)

So the results of these kind of dialogues and conversations are the starting point for a new phase in parent-school collaboration. They provide a **wealth of information and suggestions** that individual teachers and teams can use. At the same time, there is no harm in limiting what you question parents about.

“Asking parents was a good start. In retrospect, it opened a first door for change. Now sometimes parents still come to us, ‘Are you going to interview us again?’ They now feel, ‘I’m taking into account!’” (Celine, parent consultant, primary school De Buurt, Brussels)

Asking questions to teachers is a strong extension of the action ‘asking questions to parents’. The great advantage is that you can compare the results and determine how close or how far both actors are, what everyone’s needs and questions are. This can be a great starting point for a **mutual dialogue**. See boxed texts from Mechelen (“Conversations with teachers”) and Menen (“Learning communities with parents and teachers together”).




Conversations with teachers.

Stéphanie,
Community
Building
Organization
Mechelen

“Teachers were happy to be asked questions: ‘aha, for once I’m also being interviewed’. As a more ‘neutral’ person, I conducted these interviews with each individual teacher. Sometimes they were quite emotional. You could feel that they had many questions, feelings of powerlessness and frustration: ‘we have already tried so much’, ‘we put so much work into it and then the parents don’t come’. The conversations with them were a tool to express their feelings. I noticed a great insecurity to make contact with parents and at the same time a great craving for perfectionism among preschool teachers. They want to be in control. Which may also explain the uncertainty to allow parents into the classroom.

In these conversations I tried to get them to look through a parent’s eye, ‘how would this or that be for parents and how is this for you’, ‘what barriers would parents experience and what do you experience’. I also put myself in the position of the ‘ignorant one’ to freely ask, ‘why did you approach this the way you did’. For example, teachers said that an information evening did not yield much because ‘parents do not come to that anyway’. Then I could ask: ‘why do you organize it then’, or ‘how can you reach those parents then’. Through my way of questioning I could give them the feeling that we could search together for what could work. Sometimes I was asked what I myself would do in their place, and I would bounce that question back: ‘I don’t know, what do you think?’”

Learning communities with parents and teachers together



Celien, preschool teacher VlamSchool Menen, Miranda and Tine, University College Vives

“In our pilot project, we interviewed both parents and teachers. Then we developed a way to present the results to both actors together to see if we could jointly devise actions to address the perceived needs. This is how we rolled out action workshops and learning communities.

- **Action workshops:** with parents we inventoried needs and requirements using the ‘12 keys’ (see Chapter 7) and thought about possible new actions. These actions were compiled and presented to the school team, who chose whether or not to proceed with certain actions. Actions suggested by the school team were also presented to parents and evaluated. These action workshops were a preparation for the learning communities.
- **Learning communities:** Parents and one or two teachers met monthly to discuss certain topics. They discussed the needs and requirements of both sides and possible solutions that seem to make sense from the perspective of parents and the school. The teachers present in these meetings, discussed the suggested actions with the whole school team, and then decided which actions would be implemented.

Parents were invited personally in each case. They responded very enthusiastically. The invitation also mentioned that we could provide care for younger children. They could play in a play corner.

Thanks to the **workshops and learning communities**, it was possible to give parents' voices a place in the school in the longer term and the school team also learned to listen to parents who otherwise often went unheard.

— An example of a learning community session

Agenda: Feedback on calendar, organisation of info days and coffee time. It is especially noticeable that parents help translate for each other and give interpretation to things they do not understand.

Background: Parents were given the calendar in January for the January-February period. The calendar was recently updated to make it clearer for parents.

Discussion about the calendar: what activities are scheduled? What does this mean (e.g.: the 'cookie sale', the 'carnival procession')? The adjustments were explained and discussed with parents: is this an improvement? Does this address the difficulties parents experienced?

Parents find the calendar much clearer. They think it is important to go over the annual calendar step by step with the teacher. They also liked the fact that the principal came by during the session to go over the month's activities. For example, one mom did not know what a carnival procession meant and that her children had to change clothes. A number of parents also did not know that they could watch their children's parade. One parent expressed a desire to be responsible for the 'coffee hour', a moment where parents meet each other regularly at school.

— During another session: from grandparent party to toddler party

The grandparent party is an annual custom at the Vlamschool. The toddlers perform in front of their grandma and grandpa. We already took diversity into account: children who cannot invite grandma or grandpa may invite someone else, but parents were not supposed to attend. During a meeting in the learning community, anxiety surfaced among parents: did their child have to perform without someone coming especially for them? What about children who could not invite anyone? The school team decided to turn the grandparents' party into a 'toddler party' where **all grandparents and parents** are welcome. The parents were informed immediately: via a poster on the information board, orally at the classroom door and via a letter in the notebook. This proposal was very well received by the parents. Many parents came to thank us! Last school year we had an attendance of 75 grandparents of 74 toddlers in all preschool classes. This time we noticed an attendance of 120 (grand) parents of 80 toddlers.”

— Effects on teachers (preschool and primary school)?

We notice a **stronger relationship** with parents. The relations have been strengthened. Parents express great appreciation for the moments when they are allowed to be at school. The success experiences motivate the team. We notice that during the workshops both parents and teachers contribute constructively, that the trust in each other grows.

The colleagues from the **primary school** felt sorry that they could not participate in the project. They noticed the enthusiasm of the preschool team and the parents. However, they could already participate in certain actions (such as the 'mom and dad day').

3.3 'From 'action' to 'taken for granted'

Asking questions to parents (and teachers) pays off, especially if you do it right. The next step is: what can such temporary action teach us about our **school culture**? How can we ensure that we regularly - yes, almost on a daily basis - 'ask' parents, have a chat with them? A '**continuous reflex**' to ask parents for their opinions and how they feel about school or a particular action? Because obviously it's not doable to keep on conducting in-depth interviews, with or without external partners.

"You can't, for the sake of resources and time, hold these kinds of conversations every so often. That is why it is important to include the parents' perspective at other times, during enrollment or at other formal and informal moments." (Stéphanie, Community Building Organization Mechelen)

"We should try to consistently keep asking that simple question to parents: 'do you have any questions or concerns?' Or after every activity take a quick poll to find out what they thought of it. We already notice that we find out things we haven't thought of ourselves. Or that parents eventually come up with their own suggestions." (Ellen, staff member at primary school Dubbelsprong, Mechelen)

However, the effects, meaning parents and teachers that find each other more in a relationship of trust, can teach schools to focus more thoughtfully on (in)formal contacts. Setting up a in-depth interviews/focus groups properly can therefore help create a good **communication culture**. We refer to chapter 5 for more ideas and practices.

"We try to question parents consistently. At the pilot project level, we agreed to always ask parents a few questions after parent-school activities: How did you get here? What could be even better in the way of receiving and inviting you? What theme/activity would you like to see next time? In what form? What would you like to bring yourself? This has a double added value. On the one hand we hear more about the experiences and needs of parents, on the other hand we create for ourselves the habit of asking input from parents. This reflex then benefits us at other times as well." (Taïs, GO! educational network Brussel)



