

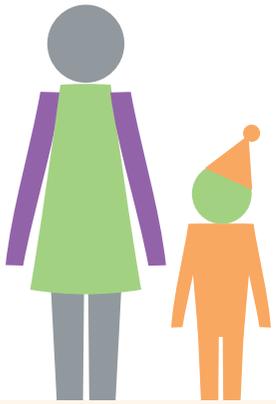


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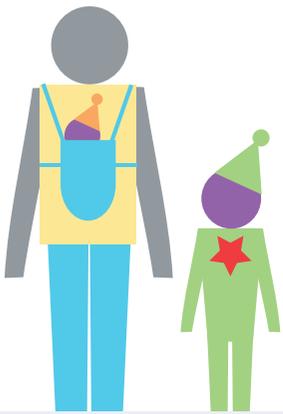


**Practice note:
getting information to parents and carers**



Contents

Introduction	3
Principles for getting information to parents and carers	5
1. Planning	7
2. Targeting	15
3. Including	19
4. Distributing	21
More information	24



Introduction

Parents¹ and carers want information about all sorts of issues connected to bringing up children. They also need good quality information to help them make choices which will affect them and their children. So, what's the best way to get this to them? Is it new information, or is it already there but hard to find? What's worked for others? And what does the evidence tell us?

Parenting across Scotland (PAS) has written this practice note to help guide services which produce information for parents and carers. It aims to improve how materials are produced for parents and to help services ensure consistency.

Services want to produce information for service users which is easy to get, find, read and understand; and takes account of their needs and circumstances. This is vital for providing a good service and also for meeting obligations under equalities legislation.

The practice note is based on experience as well as the findings of a mapping exercise which CHILDREN 1ST conducted for the Scottish Government². The Scottish Government commissioned the mapping exercise because parents consulted as part of the National Parenting Strategy³ said that they wanted information about parenting issues.

¹ We use the word 'parents' in the widest sense to include anyone with responsibility for parenting children including birth and adoptive parents, guardians, carers, kinship carers and local authorities.

² CHILDREN 1ST (2013) Mapping current sources of national information and advice and how this is delivered to parents and carers across Scotland. www.children1st.org.uk/media/221649/information_parents_scotland_mapping_report.pdf

³ The Scottish Government (2012) National Parenting Strategy: making a positive difference to children and young people through parenting. www.gov.scot/resource/0040/00403769.pdf

The mapping exercise listed rather than evaluated national sources of information for parents and carers. But it suggests that, although a great deal of national information is produced, much of it is not targeted; inclusive; relevant; accessible; available in the formats required; promoted; distributed or tracked.

This is a great shame because it means that some good information may not be reaching parents/carers. And even when it is reaching them, many organisations do not reliably know if it is doing so or if it is what parents/carers need or want. The study also found some duplication. However, on the plus side, information is generally kept up to date and is mostly free of charge.

Research referred to in the National Parenting Strategy (section 5: information and advice) indicates that there is a correlation between parents not asking for formal/informal support and low educational attainment. This has implications for anyone producing information for parents.

This practice note also draws on previous research into parenting information^{4,5} and a PAS consultation with parents of teenagers⁶. It gives some ideas about what to think about at the outset and some examples of what's worked for others.

It is organised under four headings: planning, targeting, including and distributing. You may find it helpful to use these as a checklist of things to think about and things to do.

There are suggestions about where to find further information on page 24.

⁴ Birch A., and Martin C., (2010) Health and parenting information: meeting the needs of all parents. Scottish Centre for Social Research. www.scotcen.org.uk/media/41116/health-and-parenting-information-meeting-the-needs-of-all-parents.pdf

⁵ Allen K. et al. (2012) Exploration of the information support needs of parents. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland.

⁶ Parenting across Scotland (2014) Let's talk teens: consultations with parents/carers. www.parentingacrossscotland.org/media/418153/pas-lets-talk-teens-consultation-report.pdf



Principles for getting information to parents and carers

Getting the message across is about good communication and being clear about:

- Who (exactly) the message for
- What the message is
- Why the end user needs it
- How to make it accessible to them
- How and where they will they get it
- The intended impact and outcome

Thinking about each of these aspects early on means that there is more chance of information being relevant, accessible, available and achieving the desired result.

This is the case whether the information is web-based; paper-based; audio-visual; spoken; or written.

There is a lot of information for parents and carers out there but much of it - no matter how lovely it looks or important it is - simply goes unread or remains unknown. Thinking about the end result (the outcome) is what you have to do first. And that involves planning.

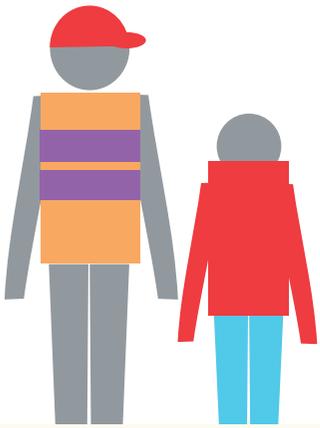
Example: Parenting across Scotland consulting with parents

Comments on materials for parents showed that the most effective format was small format booklets (approximately A6 size) which had an eye-catching cover and text that was easy to browse. Parents saw printed material as giving main points and telling them where to get more information online. They were less likely to pick up A5 leaflets than the smaller format, unless the topic was directly relevant.

Our consultation suggests that the key factors to keep in mind when developing information for parents are:

- Print material should summarise the main points and signpost to online information
- Information should be current - a problem associated more with print than web-based material
- The main sources of information for parents about teenage concerns are schools or the internet: GP surgeries, libraries and community centres are where parents/carers pick up and browse through leaflets
- Although the target audience may be parents/carers, they are likely to pass on the materials to their teenage children, so the style and content should take that into account

From Parenting across Scotland (2014), Let's talk teens: consultations with parents/carers



1. Planning

People need to feel they can trust information. So, it's important to make sure, from the outset, that it is relevant, current and correct. If it is drawing on evidence then it should explain what that is and where people can check it.

Main things to think about are:

Evidence: is there evidence to guide you?

- Where can you find evidence (formal and informal)?
- Is it current/up to date?
- Is the evidence independent of commercial interest, rigorous and trustworthy?
- What does it tell you?
- What does it say about what makes a difference or what works?

Who is the information for?

- Narrow this down so you are absolutely clear about the target audience(s) – there may be different end users all needing something different

Why do you want people to have this information?

- Is the purpose to inform, educate, change behaviour, raise awareness, skills-based or something else?
- If it is to change behaviour, what currently influences behaviour and what can you realistically change?

- Is it something they need but might not know about (for example emerging evidence about sleep or diet or internet safety)?
- Has your target audience asked for it?
- If not, how do you know they want it or need it?
- If you don't know parents need it and you are assuming, or evidence indicates that they need it, do you need to check this out?
- Is the information evidence-based (see above)?

Where else could they find it?

- Is this information already available?
- If it is available, can your audience easily find it or get it?
- If it is already available, could you promote what's there by signposting or highlighting it rather than duplicating it?
- If it's not available, are you the best people to produce it?
- Would it be more effective to do this jointly with others?

What information do you want to get across?

- What questions do people typically ask about this topic/issue?
- What do they get confused about?
- What do they find hard to understand?
- What is important for them to know (as opposed to what you want to tell them!)
- What is the best way for you to communicate with your audience about a topic which they may not have thought about, for example, breastfeeding in a sector of the population where bottle feeding is the dominant culture? How is your audience likely to react?

What medium is likely to appeal to or work for your target group?

- For example, print, website, app, sound file, DVD, intermediary/in person
- Are graphics/text or a combination more likely to appeal?
- What are the barriers to them getting information?
- What can you do to eliminate or at least reduce these?
- What can you do about multiple barriers (for example a non-English speaking person with literacy issues in their own language or a visual impairment)

What format will work best for your target group?

- Are there any particular communication needs for this target group?
- Are they likely to prefer social media, print and so on?
- Are they likely to be web-aware, or physically connected (mobile signal, fast broadband) as, if not, they will not be able to use your information
- How can you make sure it is accessible?

According to the Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF) (see page 24), information should be produced in various formats of equivalent quality, at the same price to the customer, and produced at the same time. Just like print publications, other formats such as braille or tape need planning. Many organisations start thinking about non-print versions only after the print version has been published.

A lack of demand for different formats does not necessarily mean that people do not want them. It is more likely to mean that people do not know they are available or find it hard to ask for them or are fed up asking for them.

What about design/graphics?

- How will you attract your target group?
- How will you ensure that it looks 'inclusive' and represents your target group(s)?
- What 'look' or 'feel' will work best?
- Can you use graphics, images, headings or other devices to break up text and make it more accessible?
- How will you make sure images are representative (without being tokenistic) and reflect and engage your audience?

What impact should the information have?

- For example is it to improve knowledge, raise awareness, encourage behaviour change, alert people to a new service, give people information about a particular topic?
- What is the best method for achieving the intended impact?
- Is it something that you can do or need to do in stages?

What do you want people to do as a result of having this information?

- This could include practical actions such as contacting you for more information, asking for a particular product, signing up for an event, going to a meeting

How will you test or check it?

- How will you make sure that the information is correct, targeted, relevant, understandable, informative and clear?
- Can you pre-test with potential end users?
- Can you test it with people who know nothing about the subject? When you are deep in the subject matter, it is easy to overlook jargon, or acronyms, or organisational shorthand or aspects which are just not clear

- What about translated versions?
- Who is responsible for checking content for accuracy?

How will you tell people that the information is available?

- It's not enough to simply produce something and assume your job is done (organisations often assume that because they've published something on their website that people can or will get it; this is not the case. This may be because people don't know it's there; or it's hard to find on the website; or, for many reasons, people are not able to get web-based information)
- Will you distribute it through other people/intermediaries?
- Are you trying to generate word-of-mouth – if so how will you do that?
- Would it be useful to use the press (newspapers/radio and so on); social media such as Twitter and Facebook; noticeboards (real and virtual); paid distributors and so on?

Signposting: have you involved other organisations/services?

- Is your information signposting to other local or national organisations or activities?
- Have you spoken to those organisations and alerted them to this?

How will people get the information?

- Do you want them to pick up a leaflet or read a poster – if so where?
- Do you intend to distribute it through their school or nursery?
- Will a worker give it to them and go through it in person?
- Will they find it on a social networking site?

This means understanding where your target audience works, shops, socialises and so on.

What do you need to do now to make that possible?

- For example, where do people pick things up – think about the places they go about their business
- How can you make something readable at a distance (they may not want other people to know they are reading the poster if it's a sensitive issue) – is the phone number or website large enough for people to see and perhaps memorise?
- How will it get into a child's school bag – and, more importantly, out of it?
- How can you make it obvious on your website?

How will you know if they have received the information?

- It's not enough to simply say you have produced 20,000 leaflets
- Nor is it enough to simply send them to, for example, all libraries or give to all staff to distribute

What can you do to track the distribution?

- Can you monitor using website analytics?
- Who do you need to contact and how regularly?

How will you know if the parents/carers you are targeting have understood it/ taken or not taken the desired action?

- How will you know if the information has achieved the desired outcome?
- How will you find out if the information needs to be modified?
- How will you find out what they thought of it?

How will you update it or amend it in the light of feedback and experience?

- Think about how often you will need to update it and how you will incorporate feedback

Example: NHS Health Scotland reviewing information for new and prospective mothers and their families

This is how NHS Health Scotland went about reviewing its booklet 'Off to a Good Start'.

Midwives give this booklet to every woman in Scotland during pregnancy, at around 28 weeks. It helps women think about how they want to feed their baby and to talk about this with the midwife or health visitor. It aims to support the uptake and continuation of breastfeeding and is a vital part of the therapeutic relationship between a pregnant woman and the professional supporting her. The target audience is pregnant women and new mothers but the secondary audience is the health professional as it supports consistent messages to women and their families across Scotland.

Over the past ten years, NHS Health Scotland has updated the content of the booklet in line with emerging evidence and practice. But, feedback from boards was that the booklet, although technically correct, was generally outdated: it was too wordy; the tone was not 'conversational' enough; and the images, look and feel of the booklet were no longer engaging. We knew that there were changes in evidence and practice which we needed to incorporate. It was time for a review.

So, the first step was to gather information from the practitioners working directly with parents so that we had a sense of what women and their families wanted to know and the typical questions they asked.

We formed a national review group comprising members from national networks and those with expertise in infant nutrition. The group used the information coming from parents through practitioners to determine the main themes for the booklet, including what was 'important to know' about starting and continuing to breastfeed.

After that, we reviewed the evidence for these main themes: 400 papers, narrowed down to approximately 100. We developed the text from this, and we are now designing the images to reflect the text.

Next, we will pre-test the text together with three samples of images with the target audience. The pre-test will consider readability and relevance, particularly for those who would not traditionally breastfeed and those who face challenges with literacy and language.

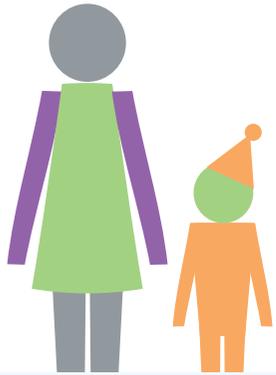
We will also conduct a health inequalities impact assessment to see what impact the booklet has on vulnerable groups, for example prisoners, those with low literacy, communication issues and so on.

At the outset, one of the main questions we asked ourselves is 'who is least likely to access this information?' That has determined how we have gone about revising the booklet, as we need to ensure that it has universal appeal.

Small organisations may not have the resources for such a thorough process, but the principles are applicable across any organisation: thinking about the target audience; consulting with end users; checking the evidence; and pre-testing the final result.

Our advice is to look around. You may be able to get support for some or all of these aspects from other organisations such as the local public health team or others within the local health board; your local college or university. Make the most of the resources around you that come for free!

**Fiona Bayne, senior health improvement programme officer (maternal and infant nutrition),
NHS Health Scotland**



2. Targeting

It's important to understand your target audience and specify it. There might be more than one 'segment' or group within this and you need to work through all the variables for each. If you go for one size fits all you may find that you just miss everybody. For example, if you say that the information is for all parents/carers and only show pictures of women, it may not seem relevant to men/it could suggest that you do not care about them/could annoy them and could be considered discriminatory.

Research indicates that parents want information which is tailored to their children and circumstances.

'Although parents recognised the universality of many issues – from concerns about sleeping patterns to issues about eating habits and nutrition – they repeatedly said they wanted to understand how general issues/information applied to their own child and in their own specific circumstances.'

'[Parents]...expressed a need...for personalised information...'

Source: Allen K et al. (2012) Exploration of the information support needs of parents. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland

- Who are the parents/carers you want to inform?
- Are they caring for a particular age of child?
- How would that affect what you do about promoting it?
- How can you make the information 'speak to' them personally?
- What does it need to look like to appeal to them?
- Where would these particular people find or get information?
- What is it that they really need to know (and what else is irrelevant information that you are determined to say!)
- Do you need to appeal to parents/carers with different characteristics, for example taking account of gender, age, ethnicity, physical and/or learning disability, rurality, lone parents and how these different characteristics interrelate? For example, a single parent might also have a learning disability. A Punjabi speaker may also have a visual impairment

- Parent information/support is undermined when parents feel marginalised
- 'Trust' shapes how information is sought, received and used
- Parents respond most positively to personalised information and support

Source: Allen K et al. (2012) Exploration of the information support needs of parents. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland

Example: People First starting primary school DVD

People First (Scotland) and Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability made a DVD for parents with learning difficulties about starting primary school.

There is very little information about starting school which is aimed at parents with learning difficulties. Most of the information which schools give out is in small print and certainly not in easy read, that's for sure. And even when they tell you stuff it's hard to take it all in and remember it. Quite a lot of parents who come to the Parents' Group find schools quite difficult places. Many of us went to special schools. It's hard for an adult to tell a teacher that they can't read or write very well. It's also hard to get the support you need to go to meetings at your child's school.

So the group decided that it would be good to make a DVD for parents about starting school. We got funding for the DVD from the national parenting strategy team at the Scottish Government and we asked media co-op to make the DVD with us. We had worked with them before and we knew that they worked in an inclusive way.

First of all we got together a meeting of parents who wanted to be involved and thought about what messages we wanted to get across in the DVD. We came up with a VERY long list! We then met with media co-op and they helped us think about what was possible in a short DVD. We narrowed down our list so we could focus on the most important messages. The hardest bit was deciding what to leave out.

The messages we decided on were:

- That it's OK to ask for support
- We know that parents don't always get the support that they ask for but we wanted to show a positive example in the DVD. We hope that this might help to shift the attitudes of professionals and help them to see how important it is for the child that the parent gets the support they need

- We wanted to give an example of the sort of support that a parent might need
- We wanted to give parents information about some of the practical things they would need to do when their child starts school
- We wanted to help parents understand the emotional support that their child might need
- We also wanted to show a positive example of someone with a learning difficulty being a good parent and we hope that this will help professionals to understand our needs and to shift attitudes

Once we had decided on these messages, media co-op came up with a draft script based on our ideas. We went through this and made some changes. The Parents Group also came up with the checklist that is used in the DVD. Once the filming was done, we watched the rough-cut and suggested a few changes to that, and we also gave feedback on the cover for the DVD.

The DVD is available on SCLD and People First (Scotland) websites and SCLD has hard copies. We told people about it through newsletters, email lists and a launch event held by the Scottish Parenting Network which SCLD co-ordinates.

We have not done a formal evaluation of the DVD, but we know that it has been popular, and that parents who have seen it have found it really useful.

People First: www.peoplefirstscotland.org



3. Including

In a room of 100 people in your community:

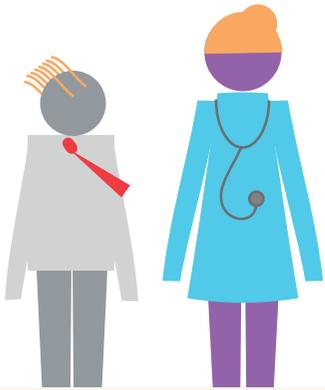
At any one time:

- 25 will have mental health difficulties which compromise their understanding
- 20 will have some hearing impairment
- 45 will need glasses and an unknown number will have forgotten to bring them!
- 4 will have dyslexia
- 1 will have an underlying health condition affecting their memory and cognitive reasoning such as Dementia, Parkinson's
- 2 will have had a stroke that has left them with language processing and speech impairments
- 2 will have a learning disability such as Down's syndrome
- 25 will have below functional literacy affecting the ability to make sense of written information
- 25 will have economic barriers to receiving information such as no internet access
- 1 will have had a life event that morning that has disorientated them
- 20 will lack the education needed to make sense of complex language
- 8 will have English as an additional language!

Source: Inclusive Communication Scotland

There are many different aspects to making sure that your information is inclusive. There are some links on page 24 to websites where you can find out more. Main points are:

- What you say should be clear and accurate (using plain language)
- It should be comprehensible to your target group (see literacy issues below)
- It should be free of jargon
- It should be available in different formats such as large print, audio, easy read, translated
- It should be available in different forms/media such as on websites, on apps, in emails, podcasts, paper
- Websites should conform with accessibility standards; and also mobile phone technology. Many people are now using the internet by smartphone or tablet (57% and growing, OfCom 2013). Many visually impaired people now use voice recognition technology on mobiles
- It should take account of literacy issues; most people in Scotland are functionally literate but a sizeable number struggle with written information. Newspapers tend to be well written and think about readability (preferring lower to upper case [not capitals] for example). The Daily Record is Scotland's most popular paper (and has a reading age of around 12). It's worth remembering this as a general guide



4. Distributing

How you distribute information also depends on your target population. Evidence suggests that, certainly for hard-to-reach parents, information is most likely to get to people when it is mediated by someone else, for example through word of mouth or through a trusted practitioner. Parents prefer personal, empathetic support from individuals in dealing with their specific needs for information and support on child health and parenting⁷.

‘More impersonal sources of information and support – including written materials, the media and the internet – were talked about⁸... as being potentially valuable, but almost always as secondary, complementary adjuncts to relationships with trusted personal sources.’

Source: Allen K et al (2012) Exploration of the information support needs of parents. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland

But this may not apply to all parents or parents with older children. Many people will prefer to use Google to find ‘just-in-time’ information as and when they need it.

An employment initiative⁹ involving mothers of very young children living in three rural areas of Scotland found that the women who took part would ask their health visitor, or any other worker they were in touch with, if they wanted information (whether or not it was relevant to that practitioner’s field of knowledge). They also

⁷ Allen K. et al. (2012) Exploration of the information support needs of parents. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland.

⁸ By fathers, young parents and parents with literacy issues

⁹ www.otbds.org/assets/uploaded_files/project/Our_Working_Lives.pdf

looked online and used social networking such as mumsnet, netmums and their own group's Facebook page (typically by mobile phone).

Social media sites are now a vital way of sharing and discovering news. For news alone, research has found that¹⁰ 43% of people in the UK between the ages of 16 and 24 were most likely to discover news stories through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter instead of using search engines, and read online rather than on paper.

However, many people do not use digital technology. They may not have internet access; fast broadband; a mobile phone signal; the money to buy equipment or be IT literate. These people are increasingly excluded as information goes digital.

This suggests that a mix of methods works best.

Example: PAS top ten tips for parents and families

Through feedback from practitioners speaking to parents, we learned that parents need reassurance that they are doing things right, and when things don't go smoothly, that this is 'natural' and not because they are 'bad' parents.

So, we responded by giving essential but 'bite-sized' information which could make a small but important difference. Our Top Ten Tips booklets give information to parents and families about topics such as play, sleep, starting primary school/high school, parenting teenagers and sex, relationships and teenagers. You can see these at www.parentingacrossscotland.org/publications/tips.aspx

The first one we wrote was for parents of teenagers because evidence showed that there was little for them. We then produced the starting school information because practitioners and research told us that 'transitions' are particularly stressful.

We made sure we weren't duplicating information by searching online and by speaking to our partners. We found some information about some of the topics but either it wasn't relevant to Scotland, or was not very 'user-friendly'. We also made sure the information was relevant and accurate by working with specialists, for example Healthy Respect for the sex and relationships booklet.

We pre-tested some of the booklets with parents before publication, for example the 'easy-read' version of starting school and also the booklet on sleep. This was really helpful and we incorporated most of the changes parents suggested.

Our budget is limited, but for these booklets, we publish hard copies and have PDF versions on our website. We rely on practitioners such as health visitors and teachers to order them and use them with parents and families in their own settings, but we are starting to use social media to publicise them too.

We monitor orders and downloads, and the repeat requests from schools and family settings indicate that the booklets are popular. Although we have not conducted a formal survey for a couple of years, practitioners tell us that parents really like the tone, design and friendly tips.

From our experience of publishing this series, we have found that parents and families know what they like but that it's not possible to keep everyone happy! You can't write by 'committee' so it's important to agree issues such as tone and style and design at the outset, especially if it's a joint publication with another organisation.

Our advice to anyone else thinking of producing information for parents is 'test, test, test'. Target your audience and make sure people know about it. There is no point in producing something really good which no one knows about, or is able to get hold of or read. We'd also say that, in general, if people have to pay to get the information, they will do without. So, if you want parents to have it, it needs to be free.

More information

Allen K et al. (2012) Exploration of the information support needs of parents. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland

Birch A., and Martin C. (2010) Health and parenting information: meeting the needs of all parents. Scottish Centre for Social Research

Parenting across Scotland (2014), Let's talk teens: consultations with parents/carers
www.parentingacrossscotland.org/media/418153/pas-lets-talk-teens-consultation-report.pdf

Parenting across Scotland (2014), Let's talk teens: seminar report
www.parentingacrossscotland.org/publications/reports-on-our-events/let's-talk-teens-seminar-2014.aspx

Communication Forum Scotland: www.communicationforumscotland.org.uk

Plain Language Commission: www.clearest.co.uk

Plain English Campaign: www.plainenglish.co.uk

Principles of inclusive communications: an information and self-assessment tool for public authorities, Scottish Government (2010), available at: www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/357865/0120931.pdf

Scottish Accessible Information Forum: www.saifscotland.org.uk

Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability: good practice guidelines for supporting parents with learning disabilities: www.sclld.org.uk



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