

Implementing the SEND Reforms: Using Structured Conversations to engage families of children with SEND

Orchard Head Junior, Infant and Nursery School, Pontefract

Background

Orchard Head is a member of the Pontefract Academies Trust. The school joined Achievement for All in June 2014 to focus on improving outcomes for the most vulnerable pupils, and to enhance the school's engagement with their most vulnerable families.

Context

There are 344 pupils on roll of which 50 are Foundation 1 and 294 in the main school. There are 34 pupils on the SEND register, four of which have a statement of SEND transferring to EHCP. There are four Looked-after children, and 75 pupils entitled to Pupil Premium funding.

The school has faced significant challenges in engaging some of the families whose children are identified with a special educational need. Having joined Achievement for All, Orchard Head decided to structure the extended Autumn term meetings around the Structured Conversation model, for the parents and carers of all pupils on the SEND register.

This proved highly successful with 100% of pupils represented at the meetings by at least one, and often both, parents/carers. Following on from these there has been positive engagement with parents who, in the past, were reluctant to engage with the school.

"This change has really empowered our parents."

Anna Huby, SENCo

Approach

When considering its approach to implementing the new SEND Code of Practice, the school decided to use its involvement in the Achievement for All programme wherever possible.

On 1st September 2014 the Achievement Coach led a training session for all staff on planning for and conducting a Structured Conversation with parents/carers. In line with the new Code, the school plans to hold at least three extended meetings per year with parents and carers of pupils identified as having a special educational need and seemed sensible to use the Structured Conversation model for these.

Preparing for the meetings, the SENCo contacted parents and carers to invite them to the meeting. Where possible this invitation was given face-to-face. Meeting times were made as flexible as possible to give every opportunity to attend, and reminder messages were sent out as the dates drew nearer. The SENCo met with the pupils concerned and talked about their learning and any barriers to their progress. Teachers and support staff were given release time from class to attend, and this served to emphasise the importance of the meetings.

During the meetings, the school ensured that the environment was friendly and welcoming and took into account that some parents lacked confidence and were often reluctant to engage with the school. At the start of the meetings, teachers adopted the role of listener rather than the role of speaker/information giver. Parents were given time to talk about their child, their child's learning and interests, both in school and outside of school. The conversations during the meetings were always around school and home working together, with the interests of the child at the heart of everything. Staff kept the tone of the meetings positive to ensure that no parent or carer felt they were to blame in some way for the challenges their child faced. It was considered essential to leave them looking forward to the meeting the following term.

Impact

Since the initial round of meetings, Orchard Head has seen increased engagement from some of their very reluctant parents/carers.

One example is a dad who previously would not engage in any way with the school, who turned up at the classroom to explain to the teacher why his son was not wearing his school tie. The ensuing conversation revealed that the pupil had one tie provided by school, and when that went missing the parents had bought another tie, which now was also lost. A third tie was provided but that too disappeared. The father wanted to make sure that they understood their son had to wear the school uniform, but that now he was having to save his pocket money to buy another tie and to ask if it would be ok if he came to school without a tie until he had saved enough. Previously this parent would not engage with school in any way, and this

new relationship was as a direct result of the successful meeting that had previously taken place with the teacher.

Key Learning

It is important that parents and carers feel they are valued as equal partners by the school.

- It is important that parents and carers know that the school listens to them.
- It is important that parents feel empowered and know that they can contribute to decisions that are made about their child's learning and participation in the wider life of the school.

Next Steps

Orchard Head plans to build upon this success and use the Structured Conversation model when planning further meetings with parents.

Contact Us

For further information visit our website: www.afa3as.org.uk

Or call: 01635 279 499