

# Experiences of Ethnic Minority Parents Home–School Partnership

## KEY FINDINGS

- 93% of parents interviewed stated that they believed that parental involvement in school was important
- Language was cited as the biggest barrier to communication with school- not all parents were aware they could ask for interpreter for formal meetings with schools and several parents spoke of using family members to interpret for them to speak to the school
- 93% of parents had attended school events, 31% attend events regularly
- Over half the parents regularly or frequently spoke to their child's teachers about school and their child's progress and 96% had attended parents' evenings
- When asked what the school could do to involve ethnic minority parents more, respondents identified greater support around language, meeting to provide information about the education system and holding social and cultural events

## HOME–SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

Under the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 the importance of schools and parents working together to support their children's learning is recognised

*The Act reflects the shared role and responsibility that schools, parents and the community have in working together to educate children. Effective home/school partnerships are essential to ensure that children get the most out of their school and their education. Working in co-operation will allow potential difficulties and opportunities to be identified at an early stage. Schools must be open to the involvement of parents in the work they do and they should consider ways of*

*providing information that helps parents engage with the school and their children's education.<sup>1</sup>*

Partnership working between home and school is identified by HM Inspector of Education as a quality indicator of the delivery of education and is regularly included as an aspect of school improvement plans. Academic research has shown the value parental involvement in their children's education

*The impact of parental involvement arises from parental values and educational aspirations and these are exhibited continuously through parental enthusiasm and positive parenting style. This has its impact on the students' self-perception as a learner and on their motivation, self-esteem and educational aspirations (Desforges 2003)<sup>2</sup>*

Parents demonstrating to their children the belief that education is important and having a regular dialogue with school instills the importance of education in their children. A home-school partnership is particularly important to parents coming from other cultures who may need additional support and information to be able to engage with their children's school and learning. Non-native parents may face additional difficulties in accessing information due to language barrier, lack of peer support to provide information and guidance and no knowledge of the places to go for information.

### **Ethnic Minority Parents' attitude to Home-school partnerships**

We found that many of the parents we interviewed understood the value of working in partnership with their children's learning. When asked if they felt parental involvement in school was important 93% of the parents agreed. In expanding their answers partnership working was a common theme

*Yes, because teachers and parents have to work alongside each other. Education doesn't stop when a child leaves the school building. I need to be aware of my children's needs so that I can boost their development (Mother, Greece)*

*Yes; if you want to encourage your child to learn, you have to involve yourself in what the child is doing at school. You also need to repeat at home what they are doing at school- teachers can only do so much (Both parents, Poland)*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/parentalinvolvementguidance\\_tcm4-374238.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/parentalinvolvementguidance_tcm4-374238.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Desforges C. (2003) The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement: A literature review, London, Department for Education and Skills. Research report RR433

The parents highlighted, in this question and throughout the questionnaire, the importance of understanding what was happening in school, how their child was progressing and how to support their learning.

*Yes, it allows parents to learn about child's progress, be part of the school life and your child can see that you are interested and involved (Mother, Poland)*

Several parents highlighted the need to be able to understand the Scottish education system

*Yes, because we will learn the education system as we come from different country and different system (Mother, Bangladesh)*

Several parents identified the benefits to the school from working in partnership and the skills and experiences that they as parents bring to help the school support their child's learning

*Yes, the school needs the parents' opinions (Mother, Pakistan)*

*Because you feel you are important person and your opinion and your voice is considered in your child's development (Mother, Syria)*

While almost all the parents we interviewed agreed that home-school partnerships were important there was also discussion around the barriers to this becoming a reality. For parents who are not confident in their English speaking to the school about issues they are concerned about or asking for information can be daunting

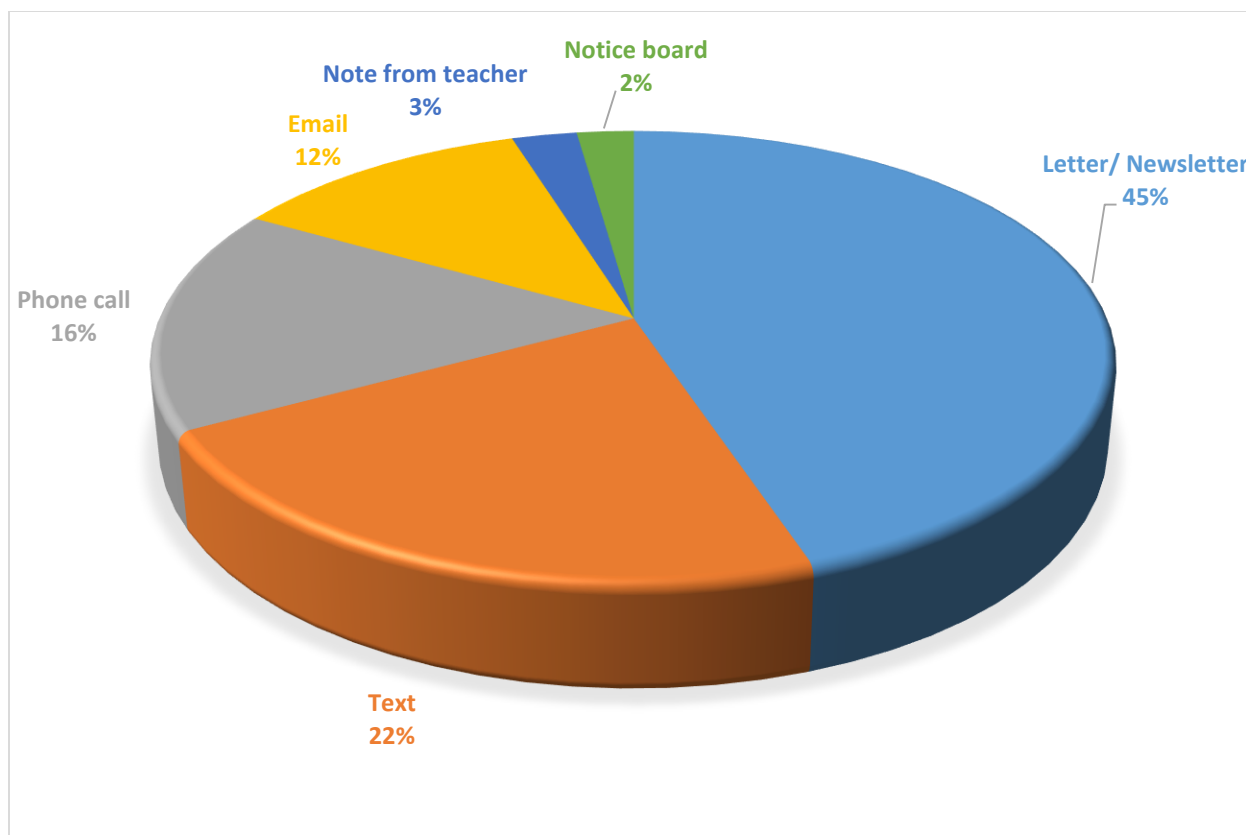
*Parents need to be provided with interpreters so that they can contribute, it is always the language barrier that stops parents taking part (Mother, Kuwait)*

Another parent raised the issue of feeling like an outsider and not having the confidence to raise issues with the school

*Especially for foreigners who don't understand the system- need to find out. But as a foreigner you don't always feel comfortable to join in/ change things (Mother, Romania)*

## **COMMUNICATION WITH SCHOOL**

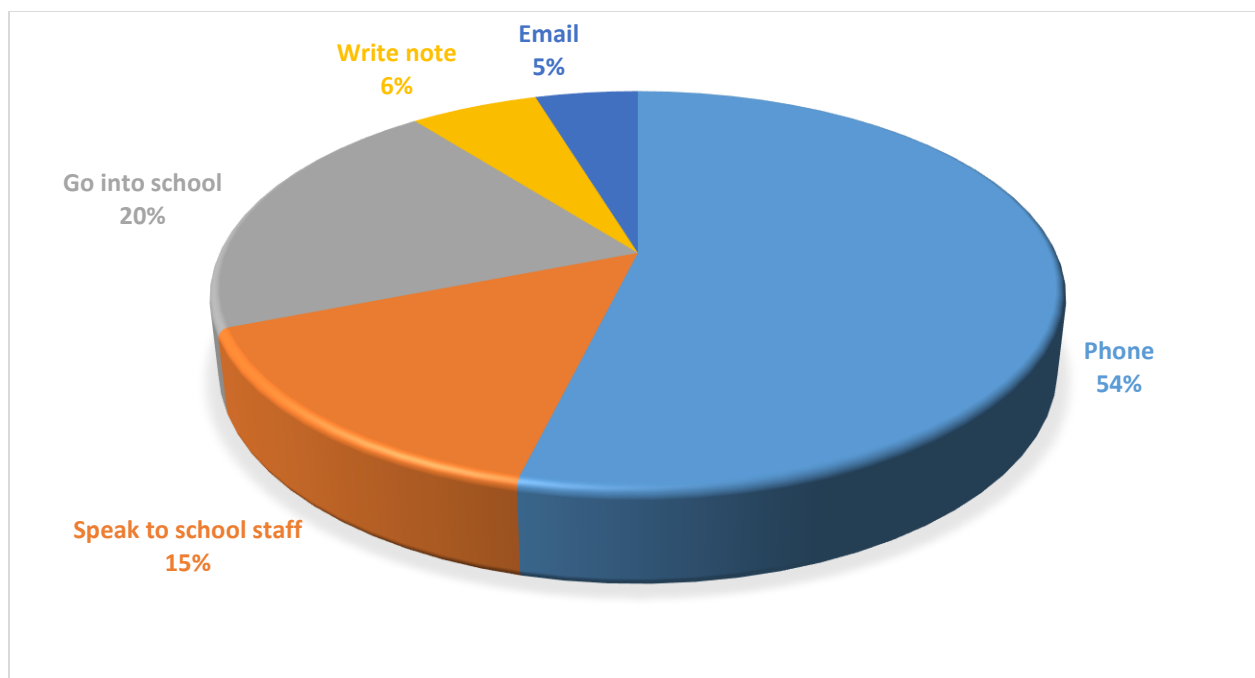
Central to home-school partnerships is good communication, we asked the parents how the school communicated with them and how they got in touch with the school.



**Figure 1: How does the school communicate with you? (Sample size: 163)**

In recent years schools have been making increasing use of texts to get in touch with parents, reminding them about school events, notifying them of changes (eg. School closure due to weather) and other information. Several parents said that this was the most helpful form of communication as it was easy to read and ensured that they got the information in a timely manner rather than being lost in their child's school bag.

For this question no parents mentioned workshops around the curriculum and the majority of communication was not face to face (email, letter, newsletters). The sessional workers had used "newsletters" as a prompt and this may explain why parents did not think of the more direct methods, like meetings with teachers and curriculum nights.



**Figure 2: How do you communicate with the school? (Sample size: 163)**

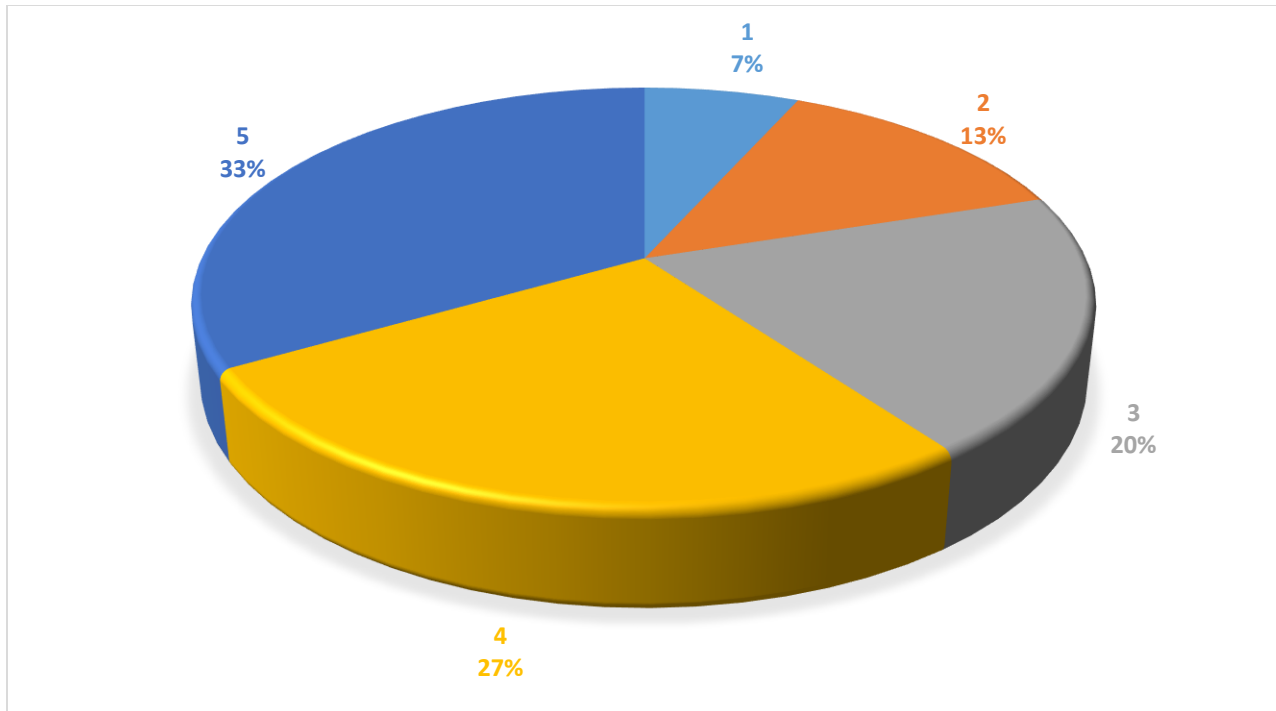
Several parents raised the issue of language when communicating with the school and stated that they used children or relatives to support them to contact the school

*I do not call them because I do not speak English but I ask my oldest son to call for me when I need something (Mother, Lebanon)*

Several parents also spoke about the difficulty of phoning the school due to their limited English

*Go to school, my English is not good enough to make a phone call (Mother, Iraq)*

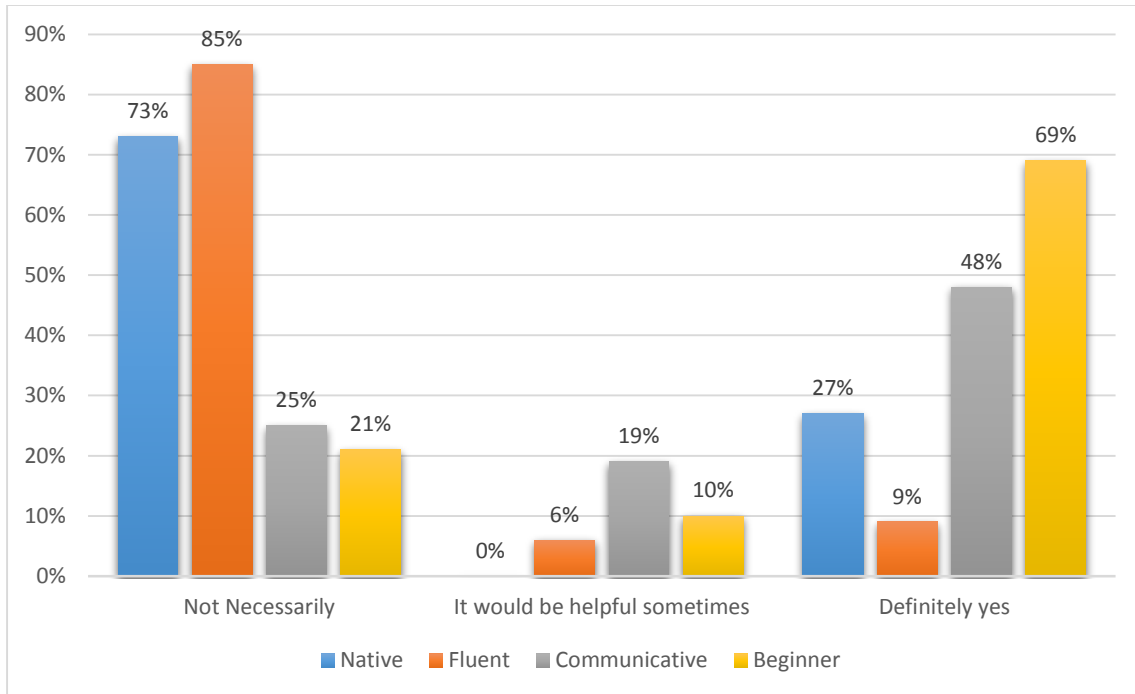
While the language barrier was clearly a problem most of the parents we spoke to had the resources and support to overcome it, at least in emergency situations such as when a child was unwell.



**Figure 3: On a scale of 1-5 how happy are you with the way the school communicates with you?  
(Sample Size: 162)**

Overall parents stated that they were happy with the manner in which the school got in touch with them, with a third of the parents stating they were very happy.

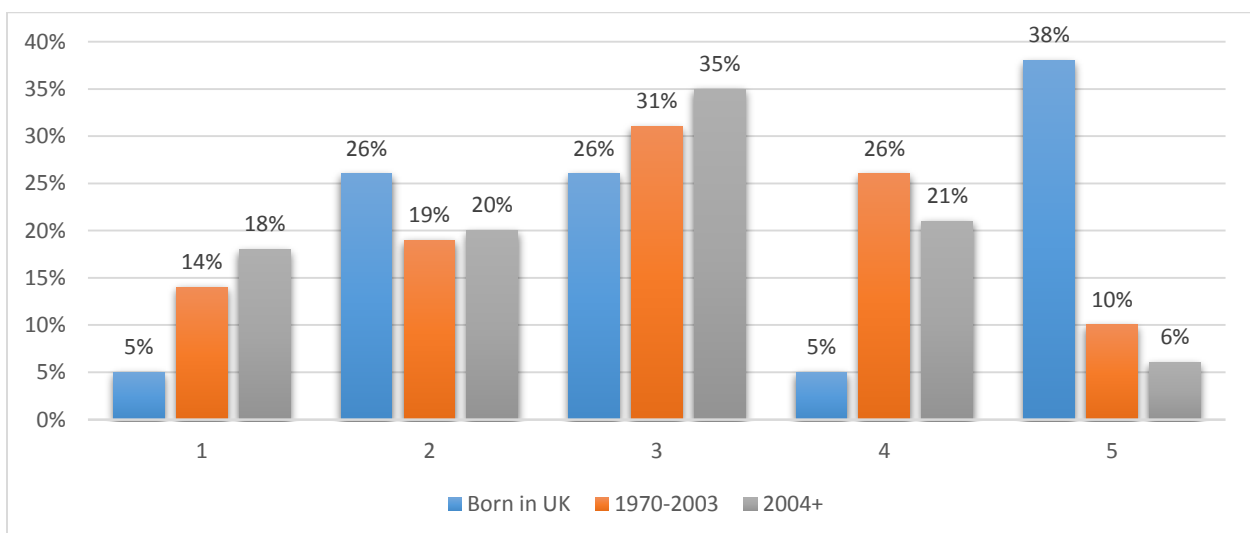
In response to the language barrier we asked if it would be helpful for information to be provided in their own language. We analysed the results by level of English of the participants. As might be expected the majority of parents who were more fluent in English reported that having interpreted material would not be necessary. However it is interesting to note that four mothers, who were born in UK and describe themselves as Pakistani said that they would like information in their own language- despite identifying themselves as native English speakers.



**Figure 4: Would you prefer to be provided with information in your own language? By English ability (based on mother's fluency) (Sample size: 156)**

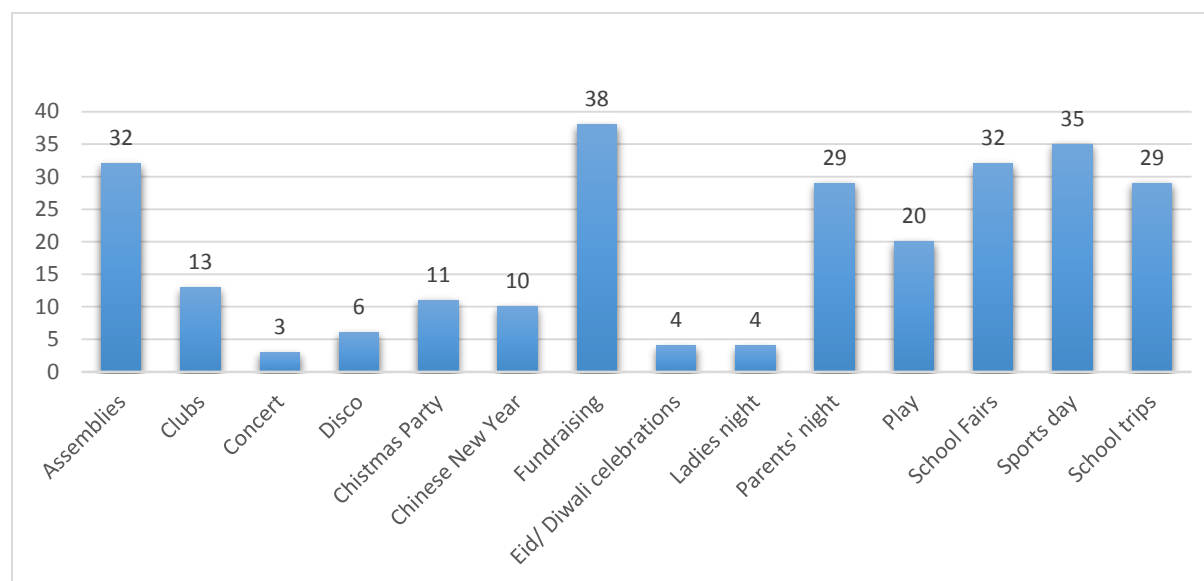
## ENGAGING WITH THE SCHOOL

Home and school partnerships also involve creating opportunities for parents to engage with the school. In our questionnaire we asked the parents about their level of involvement in the school, how often they attend school events and the barriers they experience to becoming involved.



**Figure 5: On a scale of 1-5 how involved are you in your child's school? By residency (Sample size: 161)**

As can be seen from Fig. 5 the parents who were born in the UK are significantly more likely to be involved in their children's school compared to parents who arrived after 2004, where 38% are either not involved or have very little involvement.



**Figure 6: What events does your school organize?**

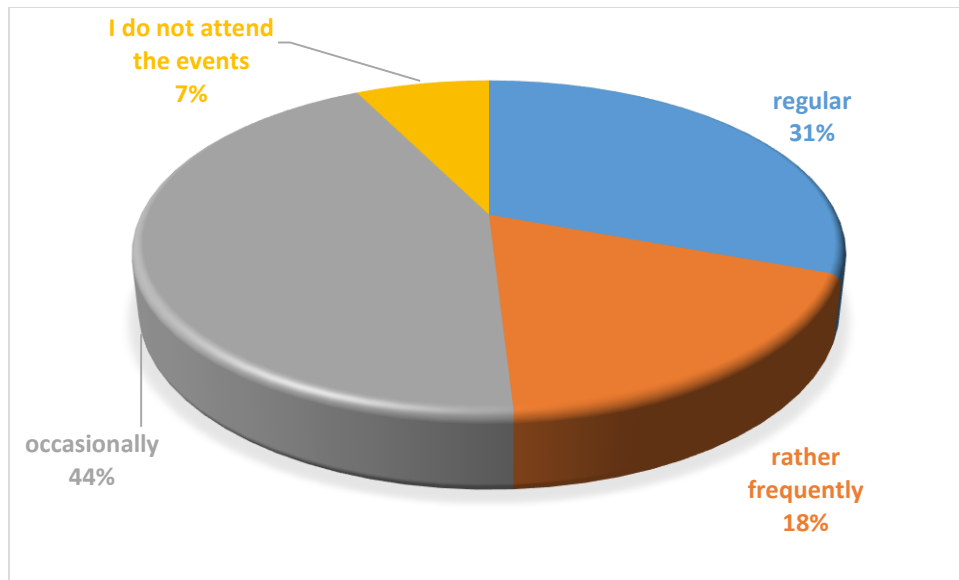
12 respondents left this question blank or stated that they did not know what events the school held. Several parents referred to events celebrating different cultures, including Eid, Chinese New Year and Diwali.

Some schools also provided information about the curriculum and how parents could support their children

*Bookstart family learning activities (council run), information session on how maths is taught (Mother, Poland)*

*Workshops for parents about children's emotional development (Both parents, Poland)*





**Figure 7: How often do you attend these events? (Sample size: 163)**

Figure 7 shows that 93% of the parents have attended events at some point with almost a third of parents attending regularly. However when we asked if they had helped at any events in school over the past two years 99 parents (60%) of the parents stated that they had not helped. Some parents stated that they had not been asked to help

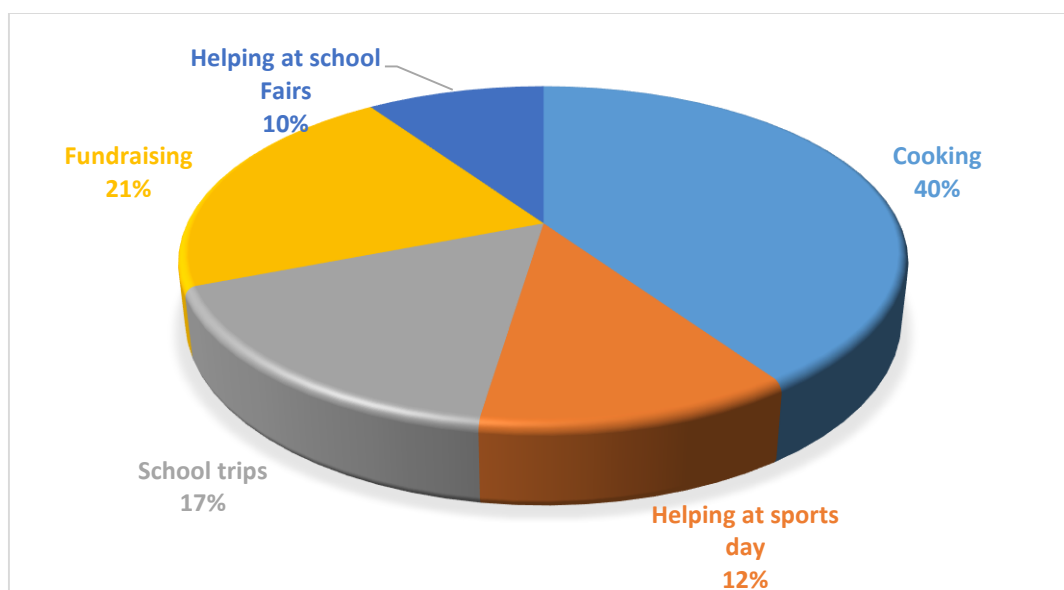
*No they don't ask parents for help (Mother, Syria)*

One parent made the point that parental involvement decreases in secondary school and there are not the same opportunities for parents to become involved

*Not at high school, at the primary I have helped with gardening and painting (Mother, UK born)*

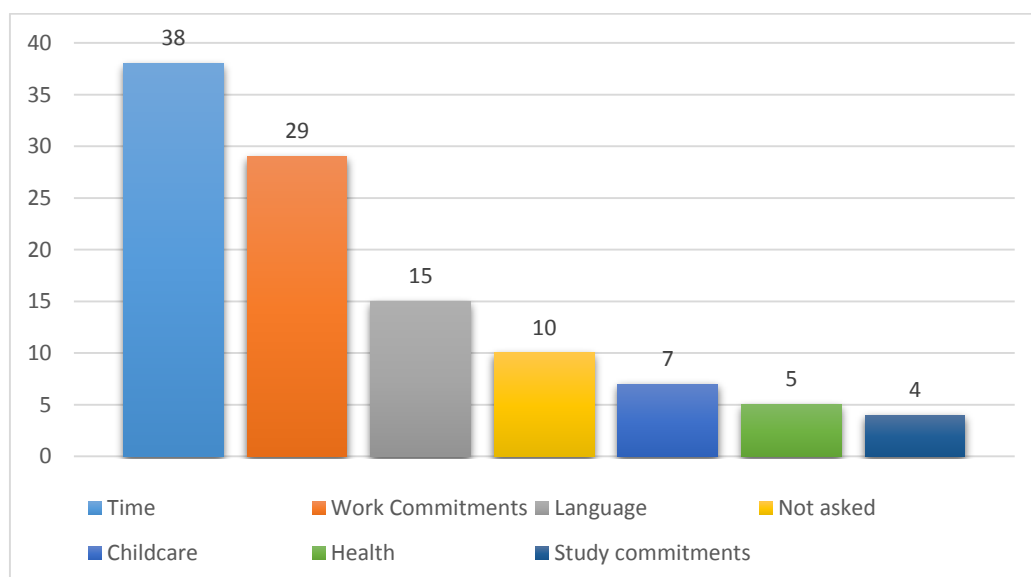
Of the parents who do help at school events the most common area was cooking or baking, in some cases this provided the opportunity for them to share their culture through making food from their home country

*Yes, I organised a Bangladesh cultural fashion show and cooking traditional food for fundraising for the school (Mother, Bangladesh)*



**Figure 8: How have you helped at school events? (Sample size: 62)**

Those parents who said that they have not helped at events at their child's school most frequently cited time and work commitments as reasons for not engaging. It is likely that these are barriers that are universal to parents across Scotland.



**Figure 9: Why haven't you helped at school events?**

Language was also mentioned by 15 parents as a barrier to becoming engaged

*No I didn't help. I don't feel comfortable taking part as I don't speak English. I feel embarrassed (Mother Lebanon)*

As well as not feeling confident in their language ability several parents mentioned feeling that the school was unwelcoming

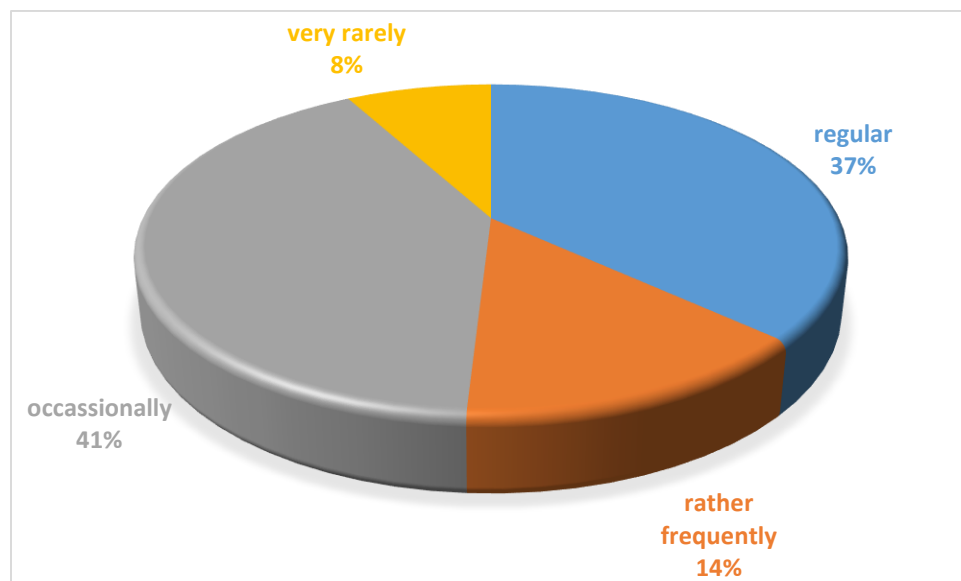
*I don't speak English, I don't feel I am welcomed. I don't know what is going on in the school. I feel that the school doesn't need me (Mother, Syria)*

The lack of welcome and sense of belonging made some parents unwilling to become involved, they did not see themselves as being a part of the school community

*Because I still don't feel like I'm a part of Scottish community. I don't feel it's "my school" and our place on earth (Mother, Poland)*

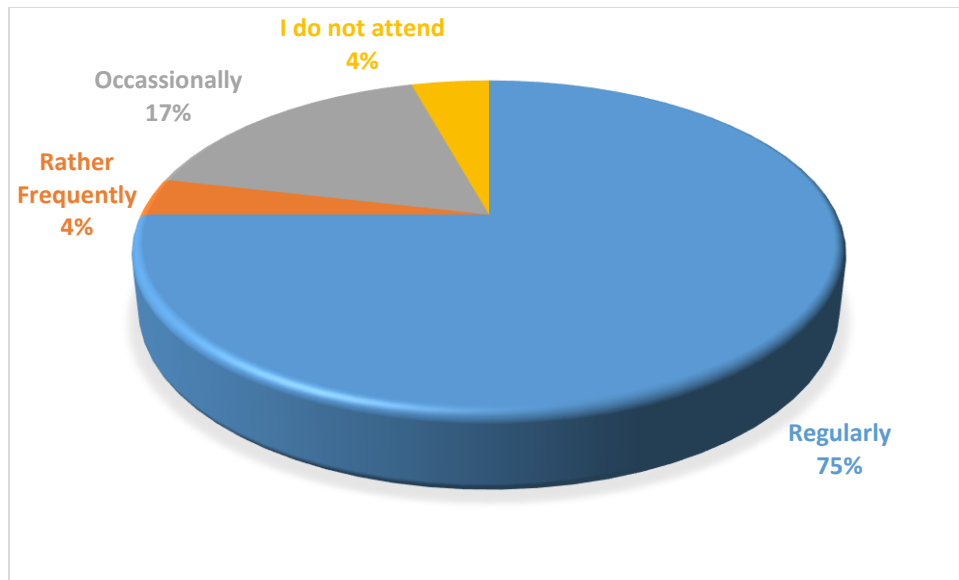
This related back to the 10 parents who stated that they had not been asked by the school to become involved. Families who are new to the UK and unfamiliar with the opportunities to take part in school activities may need the school to make extra effort to engage with them and provide ways for them to become involved.

## COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS



**Figure 10: How often do you talk to your child's teacher about school related matters and your child's progress? (Sample size:163)**

Over half the parents interviewed stated that they regularly or frequently spoke to their child's teacher about school and their child's progress. Three quarters of the parents also said they regularly attend parents' evenings with only 7 respondents stating that they never attended, one because there had not been a meeting at her child's school yet.



**Figure 11: Describe your attendance at parents' meetings (Sample size: 164)**

These statistics would suggest a high level of commitment to home-school partnerships among ethnic minority parents. When asked about parents' evenings the majority (76%) of respondents were very positive.

*Very good, it is an opportunity for parents to see their children class work and also we get all the information about our children's progress (Mother, Bangladesh)*

*Very good meetings at my child's school. Lovely parents, teachers. I enjoy being part of the meeting I feel valued (Mother, Ghana)*

The respondents specifically mentioned the opportunity to see their child's classroom and work as being useful to them as well as being able to discuss their child's progress and share their own ideas and concerns

*It's appropriate and teachers listen to parents' ideas and opinions (Mother, Malaysia)*

## **Issues with communication with school**

### **Information about child's progress**

While the majority of parents were very positive about the parents' evenings many parents expressed frustration that they did not get enough information or a clear understanding of how their child was progressing.

*They are informative- I can understand my son's academic progress, teacher tells me if there are weak points, where he's doing well etc. But I would like to see some test results- eg. in maths, from official tests. Annual report- never contains grades, only vague levels (Mother, Greece)*

*It's good to hear about child's progress and see the materials in class. But it worries me that teachers try to present a positive picture of a child, and I don't understand what they mean. I would prefer them to be more honest, criticism is only in the written report (Mother, Greece)*

**This lack of formal assessment caused parents concern as they were unsure whether their child was achieving to the best of their ability. Several parents commented on the lack of homework for their children in Scotland**

*In my country the school is more strict with children, teacher and parents, the school gives a lot of homework to children but here the school doesn't. Children play more than study (Mother, Iraq)*

*He doesn't have any (homework)- that's the problem (Mother, Bulgaria)*

**At meetings with teachers some parents said that there was more of a focus on the social relationships and their child's behavior rather than focusing on the child's academic progress. Several parents also expressed frustration that they were just given a positive picture of their child, without looking at the areas they needed support in. One parents highlighted the need to ask questions at parents' evening to get a full picture and that this could be difficult for parents who were not confident**

*It depends on the parents, if we ask questions we get more information, if we don't ask they say just "good", which is not good (Mother, India)*

### **Access to interpreters**

**The need for interpreting for parents who speak English as an Additional Language is recognised by the Scottish Government**

*Issues around language provision and translating and interpreting services are key to ensuring access for all. The provision of translating and interpreting services is an important factor as it cuts across many different areas of life, from access to services and information through to sports and leisure pursuits and business advice (Making Progress: Equality Annual Report 2003)<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2003/02/mper/6>

Parents are able to request interpreters for meetings with schools, including parents' evenings, however this is not known by all parents and the lack of support around language can limit the value of meetings with parents or prevent parents from attending

*No interpreter provided, I feel quite intimidated when I go and I don't understand the conversation (Mother, Afghanistan)*

*Unfortunately there are no interpreters provided so this discourages me to attend as my English is not good enough (Mother, Kuwait)*

### **Contact with teachers**

Parents' evenings are often rushed events, with teachers only able to spend 10 minutes with parents. Several parents raised this as a concern and felt it was not long enough to get a full picture of how their child was doing

*Too short—even the GP would have more time. They have stop-clocks. No time for discussion (Mother, Ghana)*

*OK, but sometimes wish to have more time to discuss with teacher (Mother, Pakistan)*

This is of particular concern for ethnic minority parents who may require longer due to their language needs (having the information interpreted means that meetings can take longer). As these parents are unfamiliar with the education system they may need more information and require teachers to explain things, like how their child's progress is being graded. The limit on time can also be quite restrictive making parents unwilling to ask too many questions, knowing that there are other parents waiting to see the teacher after them.

A few parents also mentioned the frequency of parents' evenings (once or twice a year), they stated that they did not feel that this is enough, particularly parents with children in secondary school who have far less direct contact with the school.

*We have parents' meetings once a year, it would be useful to meet more often, at least twice a year (Mother, Poland)*

*They are ok- could be more frequent. I felt it was too late- don't know what they're learning in class until meeting, would like to check progress week by week (Mother, Slovakia)*

While parents can contact school and arrange to speak to the teacher directly about issues and their child's progress, most of the parents we interviewed (68%) had not and parents'

evening is one of the few occasions that parents have where they can get information from the teacher about their child's progress.

*At the moment I don't feel involved at all as there was no occasion to talk to the teachers. I haven't even visited the school yet (Mother, Poland)*

One father explained why he was reluctant to ask for help when his child had a problem with homework

*I feel embarrassed, being a father and not fully understanding (Father, Pakistan)*

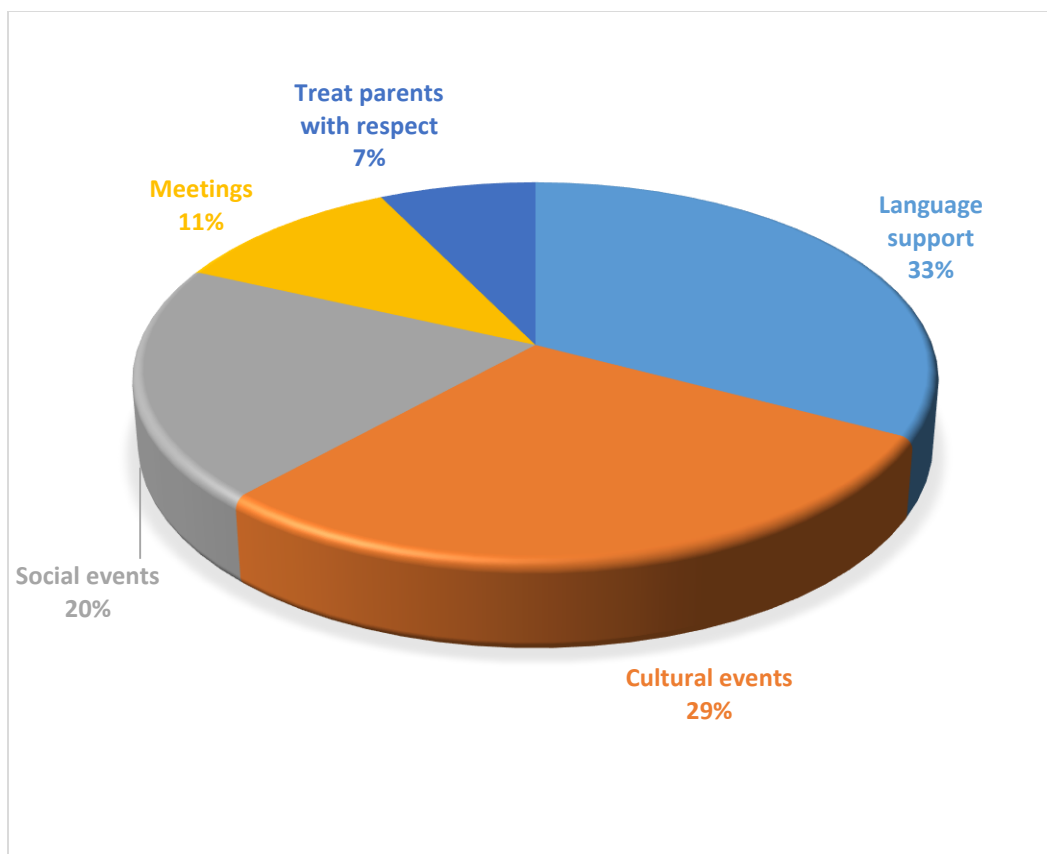
When parents do not have the confidence to approach the school and ask for help in supporting their children's learning the home-school relationship falls down meaning that early difficulties are not addressed.

## **IMPROVING COMMUNICATION WITH SCHOOL**

We asked parents what they felt the school could do to help them become more involved, as discussed earlier language was a key theme. Parents suggested having translated information coming home and also improved access to interpreters when meeting with teachers. Several parents felt that the school needed to consult the parents and have a better understanding of the needs of EM parents

*First the school needs to pay more attention to what parents from BME need to be able to be involved. We feel intimidated in front of other parents when we try to speak broken English (Mother, Kuwait)*

*Interpretation for language barrier, consult with parents how the school can accommodate them in their own language (Mother, Pakistan)*



**Figure 12: What could the school do to make Ethnic Minority parents more involved?**

Parents also suggested that the schools should do more to directly engage with other cultures, for instance recognizing and celebrating other cultures within the school. This helps to give parents from other cultures the sense that they, and their cultural heritage are welcome within the school and promotes a sense of belonging to the school community.

*I think I would be comfortable if I knew that the school organised a multi-cultural event, for example. That might break the wall between myself and the school  
(Mother, Greece)*

It was suggested that parents should be directly approached and asked to share their culture, this links back to the parents who reported never being asked to get involved- Several parents also suggested that having a more diverse teaching staff would help parents, making them feel more confident in approaching the school.

*Recruit staff from different countries or different nationalities to encourage more ethnic minority parents involved in school (Mother, Sudan)*

Having a member of teaching staff from within their community, who can help with translation and understand issues, like the importance of Halal food for Muslim parents can



reduce the barriers to involvement in the school and give parents greater confidence to raise issues with the school.

*My child's school is very diverse, there are staff from ethnic minorities which encourages parents of ethnic minorities to be more involved (Mother, Algeria)*

Several parents mentioned the opportunity to meet other parents socially or attend meetings to learn more about the Scottish education system. It was felt that bringing parents together would help “break the barriers” and provide EM parents with an opportunity to build friendships with other parents and develop a greater sense of belonging to the school.

*Organize at least once a month a social gathering to bring parents together to break all the barriers (Mother, Egypt)*

Some parents also highlighted the need for more information around how their children were taught, the curriculum and what happened in school

*Provide more information before starting school (before P1)- basic information- structure of school day eg. I didn't know child would be saying prayers every morning at school, whether he would go outside every day etc. (Mother, Poland)*

Four parents suggested that the school needed to treat ethnic minority parents with greater respect, making an effort to make them feel a part of the school.

*Respect and treating parents as part of the school- not like strangers (Both parents, China)*

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From our research Ethnic Minority parents are supportive, in theory, of home school partnerships and understand that both parents and school have an important role to play in supporting their children’s learning.

*In Greece we had a principle that the chain has 3 links; school, pupils and parents- if one link breaks the chain is broken. School is a very important part of a child's life- parents must know about it. (Mother, Greece)*

Parents reported high levels of attendance at school events and parents’ evenings and that they valued the opportunity to speak to teachers about their children’s progress. However, the questionnaire also showed significant issues around communication between home and school with parents not always having access to language support, they feel that there are

limited opportunities to speak to the teacher and can struggling to understand how the education system works in this country.

To better support ethnic minority parents to be partners in their children's learning we recommend the following steps:

- More needs to be done to ensure that parents know that they can request an interpreter for key meetings with school and to address the stigma that some parents feel in requesting one. We also recommend that schools take steps to avoid the inappropriate use of children as interpreters.
- Schools should recognise that parents from other cultures may need longer at parents' evenings and other key meetings to allow for interpreting and as they are more likely to be unfamiliar with the education system and require more information about how their child is being assessed and taught.
- As highlighted by the OECD report, it needs to be clear to both parents and teachers how well the child is progressing. Schools should develop clear information on how children are being assessed and sign-post parents to resources to enable parents to support their child's learning
- Schools to be given resources to hold information events for parents on the Curriculum with supports available for ethnic minority parents (such as interpreters and child care provision). There is also a valuable opportunity to build links with community groups to help get information out to parents and for greater partnership work between communities and schools.
- Parents felt welcomed and included when school made an effort to recognise the cultural diversity within the school- including cultural events, signs in different languages etc. We advise that all schools are make efforts to reflect the school's make up
- Schools to develop new ways for parents to contact the school- recognising the challenges in phoning the school for parents whose first language is not English.