‘where do they go for advice?’

A Pilot Study of Parents’ Views and Experiences of Independent Educational Advice
About the Scottish Consumer Council

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) was set up by government in 1975. Our purpose is to promote the interests of Scottish consumers, with particular regard to those people who experience disadvantage in society. While producers of goods and services are usually well-organised and articulate when protecting their own interests, individual consumers very often are not. The people whose interest we represent are consumers of all kinds: they may be patients, tenants, parents, solicitors’ clients, public transport users, or simply shoppers in a supermarket.

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- carrying out research into consumer issues and concerns;
- informing key policy and decision-makers about consumer concerns and issues;
- influencing key policy and decision-making processes;
- informing and raising awareness among consumers.

The SCC is part of the National Consumer Council (NCC) and is sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry. The SCC’s Chairman and Council members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in consultation with the Secretary of State for Scotland. Future appointments will be in consultation with the First Minister. Martyn Evans, the SCC’s Director, leads the staff team.

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The SCC assesses the consumer perspective in any situation by analysing the position of consumers against a set of consumer principles.

These are:

ACCESS
Can consumers actually get the goods or services they need or want?

CHOICE
Can consumers affect the way the goods and services are provided through their own choice?

INFORMATION
Do consumers have the information they need, presented in the way they want, to make informed choices?

REDRESS
If something goes wrong, can it be put right?

SAFETY
Are standards as high as they can reasonably be?

FAIRNESS
Are consumers subject to arbitrary discrimination for reasons unconnected with their characteristics as consumers?

REPRESENTATION
If consumers cannot affect what is provided through their own choices, are there other effective means for their views to be represented?
Chairman’s preface

Parents and young people face numerous decisions during the course of a child’s education. In addition, they will encounter decisions being made on their behalf, such as by schools or by local authorities. The responses people make to these decisions can have very serious implications for the child’s education. For this reason, parents and young people need access to good quality information and advice. Sometimes this can come from schools and local authorities, but there are times when people need access to an independent source of information and advice.

In 1999, we published a report on the provision of independent information and advice in education, as little was currently known about it. Based on responses from a range of advice providers, we found serious gaps in provision.

It was important to seek ways of addressing these gaps, but this should only be done on the basis of evidence from parents and young people themselves. This report is a first step towards obtaining this evidence. It is based on a series of focus groups with parents from various perspectives. The issues raised by the parents who took part point to the need for larger scale research, and indicate the sorts of questions we might begin to ask.

We are delighted that SCRE undertook to conduct the focus group research for us, and we offer this report to prompt discussion with the research community and others on the next steps for identifying the priorities of parents and young people in this area.

Graeme Millar
Chairman
## Contents

Acknowledgements iv  
Summary v-vi  

1. **Introduction and methods**  
   1.1 The need for parents to be informed 1  
   1.2 Research method 2  
   1.3 The groups and participants 2  
   1.4 Research questions 3  
   1.5 A note on the quality of evidence 3  

2. **Why do parents need advice?**  
   2.1 Pre-school stage 4  
   2.2 Transition points 4  
   2.3 In-school issues 4  
   2.4 Special educational needs 5  
   2.5 Home education 6  
   2.6 Summary 7  

3. **Where do parents go for information and advice about education?**  
   3.1 Pre-school establishments and schools 8  
   3.2 Local authorities 9  
   3.3 Where else? 10  
   3.4 Summary 11  

4. **Do parents find it difficult to access independent advice?**  
   4.1 Barriers to accessing information and advice 12  
   4.2 Perceptions of ‘independent’ advice 15  
   4.3 Summary 15  

5. **Parental preferences and next steps**  
   5.1 Provision of information and advice 16  
   5.2 Summing up 17  
   5.3 Further investigation 18  
   5.4 Final comment 18  

References 19  
Glossary 20  
Appendix 1 21
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Dr Sheila Hamilton
Dr Valerie Wilson
Introduction and methods
This study was commissioned by the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) and carried out by researchers at The Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) in May and June 2000. The research was an exploratory small-scale study undertaken as a means of identifying the needs of parents for independent advice (i.e. that not provided by the school or local authority) with a view to establishing whether more detailed research might be fruitful. The project, for which information was collected from 37 participants in six focus group meetings, was a follow-up to research carried out by the SCC in 1999 on the providers of information/advice and the services they offer parents (see SCC, 1999).

Findings
Why do parents need advice?
The evidence from the group discussions shows that there are many reasons why parents might seek information and advice about educational issues and also a variety of situations in which they might need an independent opinion to help them make decisions. These include:

• a general concern about issues and events in school for which they perceive they are not receiving satisfactory information
• specific issues, such as when they have children with special educational needs or decide to educate their child/children at home.

Despite identifying these two broad categories, most of the participants, with the exception of those who had chosen to educate children at home, had little knowledge of why they might have recourse to the independent advice route.

Where do parents go for information and advice about education?
Participants identified a range of sources of information and advice which they had either used themselves or might use if they needed independent advice. These include:

• the local school
• local authority education departments
• a range of advice centres and voluntary organisations
• individual personal contacts
• information sources, such as libraries and the Internet.
However, it was apparent that parental knowledge of sources of information and advice appeared to be vague and tentative in many instances. For example, few participants had heard of national helplines. There is therefore a need to consider parents’ knowledge and experience of independent information and advice services and how this impacts on their ease of access to advice services.

**Do parents find it difficult to access independent advice?**

The evidence from the focus groups shows that parents find it difficult to access information and advice services when:

- it is difficult for them to meet teachers
- they lack confidence or feel inarticulate
- there are language barriers
- there are delays in responding to their enquiries.

There were mixed views on the nature of ‘independent advice’. Many participants doubted whether schools or education authorities could provide genuinely impartial advice but were largely unaware of alternative sources.

**Parental preferences and next steps**

Many participants prefer support provided locally and made suggestions as to how advice services at that level could be developed further. These include provision of:

- an information officer
- an independent mediator
- greater publicity of independent advice sources
- more information in the school prospectus with regular updates
- more opportunities for parents and young people to have informal contact with schools.

There was some support for a national telephone helpline which could offer a one-stop ‘advice shop’ for parents wishing to discuss educational issues.

Overall, most participants had little knowledge of sources of independent information and advice; had not sought advice and were unable to comment upon current providers of independent advice. We, therefore, suggest there is a need to study parental needs and knowledge of advice providers in Scotland more fully to identify:

- the extent of parents’ needs and knowledge with a larger sample of parents
- the adequacy of provision
- any mismatch between needs and provision.
1 Introduction and methods

This study was commissioned by the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) and carried out by researchers at The Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) in May and June 2000. The research was an exploratory small-scale study undertaken as a means of identifying the needs of parents for independent advice (ie that not provided by the school or local authority) with a view to establishing whether more detailed research might be fruitful. The project was a follow-up to research carried out by the SCC in 1999 on the providers of information/advice and the services they offer parents (see SCC, 1999).

1.1 The need for parents to be informed

Parents, as individuals and as a group, are encouraged to become involved in their children’s education and are now seen as active partners in the education process (see, for example, SEED, 1999, p28). Parents are encouraged to be informed and their views are sought on a wide range of issues including participation in decision-making through the consultation exercises of government departments and other agencies. There are also opportunities for parents to represent the local parent body through involvement in the school boards and parent/teacher associations of their children’s schools.

To be able to participate in an informed manner, parents need to know where to go for information and how to access appropriate advice. Advice about education is available from schools, local authorities and the government. For individual parents, concerns about education will often be personal, specific and local as their immediate focus is likely to be on their own child’s situation and experience.

Many parents will not need to have recourse to independent information and advice about education because their needs are met at school or local authority level and problems have not arisen in their experiences of schooling. When a problem arises, or a parent wishes to challenge a decision made by a school or local authority, parents may want help from an independent source. There is often, as previous research by the Scottish Consumer Council noted, an overlap between concerns and complaints (SCC, 1994).

Parental knowledge varies. Parents from backgrounds of social and economic disadvantage may not be aware of sources of information and advice and be more willing to accept advice from schools and education authorities. Those parents with a better knowledge of ‘the system’ may find it easier to access independent information and advice. An SCC report (1999) indicates a range of issues for which advice might be sought including admissions/placing requests, attendance, custodial rights, exclusions, bullying, special educational needs, transport, attitude/conduct of teaching staff, school boards, pre-school education, and home education.

While parents will have differing needs and knowledge, and often require individual solutions to their child’s educational problems, knowledge of information and advice sources are likely to have some common features. These are what this small-scale project set out to explore.
The aim was to focus on the experience of parents who had sought independent advice and to explore parental views on: their need for independent educational information and advice; the accessibility of independent advice and their preferred sources of advice. In addition, examples of good practice in providing information and advice provision were to be noted.

1.2 Research method

Six focus groups were set up. As far as possible, each group aimed to represent a particular group of parents. We relied largely on intermediaries from appropriate organisations to help us identify potential participants. This made it possible to undertake the project within the short period available. Participants' experiences of seeking advice varied. It should be noted that relatively few had used independent sources of information and advice and as a consequence individuals in the groups demonstrated disparate levels of knowledge of advice providers. This is discussed further in 1.5 below.

In all, 37 participants attended meetings, allocated to groups according to their main area of interest. The six focus groups centred round: the nursery, primary and secondary sectors; pupils with special educational needs from ethnic minority groups; parents associated in some way with the Scottish School Board Association; and home educators. By identifying groups in this way, we hoped that a wide range of issues and perspectives would emerge which could inform further research. It was decided not to include a group exclusively for parents of children with special educational needs, in keeping with current inclusive education policies and the number of specialist agencies providing such advice. (In practice, advice on special educational needs was an issue which emerged in most of the groups.)

Five of the six group discussions were tape-recorded; full notes were taken of the sixth. Evidence was analysed thematically and is reported in chapters 2 to 5.

1.3 The groups and participants

Though participants were allocated to groups according to their main sector of interest, there were, inevitably, overlaps between categories, with parents referring in discussion to children at different school stages. The groups were as follows.

**Group 1: Ethnic minority groups**
This consisted of seven parents and carers of children with special educational needs (SEN) from ethnic minority groups. All were female. They attended a carers’ course organised by a community relations officer and were thus all known to each other.

**Group 2: SSBA connections**
This consisted of six parents (four female, two male). Some had had some contact with the Scottish School Board Association and some were recruited locally. As it turned out, this group included perspectives from primary, secondary, special educational needs and senior pupils. It included two SSBA executive members, a chairman of a local school board and three parents who were, or had been, teachers.

**Group 3: Pre-school sector**
This group (eight participants: five female and three male) brought together parents connected with a local authority pre-school establishment which had extended hours and support from a multidisciplinary team of professionals. The group included some parents who also had children beyond pre-school age.
Group 4: Primary sector
Group 4 for parents of primary pupils, drew upon the experiences of a parent support group in a city housing scheme. Unfortunately, attendance was low with only two mothers participating. This provided an opportunity for an in-depth discussion in which one parent expressed concerns about the lack of advice for children with special educational needs.

Group 5: Secondary/senior pupils
The fifth group (six participants: five female and one male) was held in a community school. It provided a wide range of perspectives of secondary education, transition to secondary school and special educational needs.

Group 6: Home educators
The final group was contacted via a home-education support group. There were eight participants, five female and three male. This group differed from the rest in that its members had both sought advice and also provided support for others wishing to educate their children at home. Therefore, issues raised were more informed than in the other groups.

Other responses
Some participants who could not attend the focus groups sent email or written responses. This was not a formal part of the research design and only some data are included. However this could be a way of reaching more parents in any future project.

1.4 Research questions
The main research questions explored in each group were (see Appendix 1):

- why do parents need advice?
- where do they seek information and advice?
- how do parents find out about sources of information and advice?
- do parents find it difficult to get access to independent advice?
- what kind of advice have parents found most helpful?
- how do parents prefer to access educational information and advice?

Chapters 2 to 5 which follow present a summary of the findings from the group discussions; highlight issues arising from the study; and suggest possible priorities for further investigation.

1.5 A note on the quality of evidence
It was not possible for the parents who participated in the study to discuss the relative merits of different sources of independent advice on the basis of experience since most had not sought such advice. Those who had were usually responding to specific problems their children had encountered, such as a need for special educational provision. We concluded that those who were more knowledgeable about sources of advice were better informed because of personal experience of seeking information, involvement with the local school or being employed in the education sector. Since experiences were shared and discussed, other parents were enabled to express opinions on services they had not themselves used.
2 Why do parents need advice?

This chapter provides insights into parents’ concerns and why they might need to involve advice agencies in resolving educational difficulties. Since few of the participants had sought advice in this way much of the discussion was hypothetical. Participants suggested a wide range of reasons why advice might be sought and general issues were as important as individual problems. Many felt there was a serious lack of clear information and advice from schools and some questioned whether schools were prepared to provide parents with information about alternative sources of advice. There was a sense of frustration that parental needs were not being met by school, far less by any other agencies. Specifically, the discussions identified several stages or areas where independent advice might be required. These include: pre-school; transition stages; in-school issues; special educational needs and home education. We consider each in turn.

2.1 Pre-school stage

Parents were generally satisfied with their children’s experiences of pre-school education (cf Howe, 1999) believing it to be too early for them to have many problems which would require independent advice. Those with older children in the educational system were more informed than the rest. The main concerns to emerge in this group were choice of primary school, availability of places in the school of their choice and, to a lesser extent, provision of learning support in the nursery school. It is significant that parents of pre-school children felt that they had good access to information and support from pre-school establishments.

2.2 Transition points

Parents with children who had experience of moving from pre-school to primary school or primary to secondary raised concerns about transitions. These included: continuity of learning support; variability of induction procedures in secondary schools even within the same local authority area; and reliability of advice from schools about university entrance requirements. In general, those who commented on this felt that the relationship between schools and universities could be improved.

2.3 In-school issues

The range of issues which might prompt parents to seek independent advice included:

Exclusion from school

One parent reported that her son was excluded from school but felt that the school had dealt with it appropriately. However, in contrast, another parent had a quite different experience and had sought outside advice. She reported that both her sons had been excluded from school. In the dispute with the headteacher after the boys were excluded from school the parent had sought information from the Internet, the SSBA and a lawyer. She found the last to be the most helpful.
Examinations

Some parents felt it was difficult to get information about subject choice at different stages throughout secondary school and also about the different levels of General and Credit at Standard Grade. This ties in with a concern some participants had about the adequacy of the information received from schools. Some parents of pupils in fifth and sixth years were concerned about the introduction of the new Higher Still examination system. One parent felt that he ‘didn’t get the basic information despite having asked’. His perception was that: ‘There’s something else at higher level, we keep getting information about the Scottish schools and their education, all doing this and that. We can’t even get the basics. It’s misinformation that’s being sent from the top. And your Higher Still, the thing that was splashed all over the paper only got a wee column in certain papers, the fact that the test papers came out late... the admin. was in a mess’.

Incidents in school

Incidents in the classroom at both primary and secondary, and how schools dealt with these, might prompt parents to seek advice. Many felt that schools did not always address their concerns. For example, one parent spoke to her child’s primary teacher about comments made by other children about the child’s facial disfigurement and was not satisfied with the outcome. Parents of secondary pupils believed that they did not receive enough information about serious problems such as bad behaviour in class, bullying and drug problems. Again parents felt that their concerns were not always addressed by schools: ‘When I went to complain to guidance [staff] that I wasn’t happy about my son being in this class I was told... it’s character forming’. How to deal with bullying in school was identified as a problem. A parent recounted that her friend was ‘nearly at her wits end’ because of the school’s inaction and that she did not know where else to seek advice. Discussion also revealed some concerns about the behaviour of individual teachers, ranging from use of inappropriate language to their attitudes towards pupils.

2.4 Special educational needs

Special educational needs were seen as a main reason for going beyond schools or the education authorities for information and advice. Even when the school and education authority provides multidisciplinary team support for a child with special educational needs, parents may still feel frustrated by the lack of impartial advice and support. This situation was described by a parent whose son had a rare disorder which caused learning development problems. He had been kept back a year at the local nursery school to allow him time to catch up. Over three years she had sought help and advice from different agencies including local groups and the national helpline Enquire and had also undertaken her own research using the Internet and voluntary bodies. She had had her child assessed for special needs and attended multidisciplinary team meetings to discuss the child’s case. She was aware of the government policy on inclusive education and wanted her son educated in a mainstream primary. Despite this, her education authority set up a Record of Needs, recommending the child attend a special school. The parent’s sense of frustration and helplessness was compounded by the mixed message received about the child’s rights to mainstream education and the lack of an advocate to help her challenge the decisions being made. The nursery school encouraged her but the primary was unable to offer an auxiliary worker. Her response to the professionals involved was, ‘I’ll fight if you tell me where to go’. She subsequently decided to place her child in a mainstream primary school and discovered that auxiliary help was available after all.
Parents from ethnic minority groups had particular concerns about special educational needs provision for their children. For them, the issue could be compounded by a need to understand English as a second language. Group members felt that the availability of a bilingual support team was crucial to the resolution of such problems.

2.5 Home education

Parents who had chosen to educate their children at home felt that, although they were a minority, they required a range of independent information and advice. This might be required before a child reached school age, to support decision-making, and also at any time thereafter to enable parents to provide a balanced education.

One parent described how she perceived the process of deregistering her child for education at home to be fraught with difficulties and obstacles. Believing her child to be gifted, she had sought advice over five years from the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGCS), her health visitor, the pre-school educational psychologist, school educational psychologist and senior education officer when it had become clear to her that the mainstream school approach would not meet the learning needs of her child. A counsellor at NAGCS told her about Education Otherwise, a UK organisation. She said: ‘Finding information from the authorities was not an option. The educational psychologist told us he had never met a child like ours, had no experience in that area and that as far as he knew no help whatever was available’. As to how parents in this situation might find information and advice, she noted: ‘Access to information often depends on whether you have a positive relationship with the school or how adept you can be in ferreting out your rights...It was information as well as support that we required and neither was forthcoming from ‘official’ sources’. In particular, she felt hostility from school staff, local councillors and officers, with one officer mentioning the possibility of court action on a number of occasions. As she now knows: ‘This was not only gross misinformation and intimidation but caused us a great deal of stress’.

Reasons for choosing to educate children at home vary. These may include bullying in school, having a child with special needs or who is gifted, a belief in the ethos of home education, or a breakdown in relationships between parents and the school or education authority (Schoolhouse Home Education Association, 1999). The actual decision may mark the end of a long process during which parents have sought guidance. For one parent, the differences between the age of starting school in Scotland and England compounded the difficulties. Once parents decide to educate children at home, they continue to require information on the curriculum and exam systems. In particular, participants cited their need to know more about the 5-14 Curriculum Guidelines and the new Higher Still examinations and timetabling arrangements. Parents also wanted to know where they could get information about resources and teaching materials.
2.6 **Summary**

The evidence from the groups showed that there are many reasons why parents might seek information and advice about educational issues and also a variety of situations in which they might need an independent opinion to help them make decisions. These include:

- a general concern about issues and events in school for which they perceive they are not receiving satisfactory information.

- specific issues, such as when they have children with special educational needs or decide to educate their child/children at home.

Despite identifying these two broad categories, most of the participants, with the exception of those who had chosen to educate children at home, had little knowledge of why they might have recourse to the independent advice route.
3 Where do parents go for information and advice about education

The survey of independent advice provision in Scotland published by the Scottish Consumer Council in 1999 revealed a wide range of bodies which can provide parents with educational information and advice. The report also noted that there was no directory available to inform parents.

In this chapter we report the sources of information and advice known to the participants in the focus groups. It is important to note the distinction between knowledge of information and advice sources and experience of using them. In some groups participants had knowledge of where they might go but had not used the services. Even then, their knowledge was hazy and in many cases tentative. Those parents who had sought advice were more informed but even they had not exploited the full range of available services.

What were parents’ perceptions of the educational information and advice available from the range of national and local advice providers? Where would they go for advice? The general message to emerge is that most parents recognised that where they went would vary according to the nature of the enquiry. However, many admitted that they would have difficulty knowing where to go.

3.1 Pre-school establishments and schools

Most parents across all the groups said they would contact their child’s school for general information and advice in the first instance. Even for specific problems parents reported that schools would still be the first point of contact. This echoes the findings of the SCC report on complaints and redress (SCC, 1994) in which parents saw the school as the ‘first port of call’.

Parents of pre-school children felt they rarely needed to seek additional information. The type of nursery their children attended – which was an open nursery with extended hours, adult education, and advice and support from a variety of professionals, including a community education worker – provided sufficient support. As one parent explained: ‘Best place to go is the nursery really. They would have information. They know the specific problems as well so [are] better equipped’.

Levels of support and advice may vary across pre-school establishments but in general our findings accord with the high level of parental satisfaction with pre-school provision identified by other researchers (Howe et al, 1999).

When their children moved on to primary school, the participants reported contacting teachers and headteachers for advice.

The first point of call is the school.

I went to the class teacher and headteacher.
My first port of call would always be the headteacher. Because I feel that she’s very good at our school and she would take the time to point me in the right direction. It may not always be impartial advice that she gives, but she would always point me in the right direction if I had no clue at all but there’s nothing really advertised anywhere.

Yet this parent also noted that there was a general lack of knowledge:

If you don’t have a specific need and have to go digging and delving, there’s no [telephone] numbers around that you can instantly think of to call. I mean apart from Childline, I haven’t really heard of any other groups.

However, points were raised about school size and regional variations. One participant suggested there was less need to go beyond the school for advice in small primary schools; everyone was in close contact with each other and advice and support were available within local networks. Raising sensitive issues in a small school, especially an issue involving complaints against teachers, could be difficult. Other research (Wilson and McPake, 1998) concluded that while the size of a school could be both a strength and a weakness, headteachers of small schools were more likely to consult parents informally than those in larger schools.

Several participants believed that support services varied across local authorities. For example, one parent cited different practices across different authorities regarding children with special educational needs being assessed independently at parents’ expense.

In both primary and secondary schools, school boards and parent teacher associations (PTAs) were also seen as sources of information but ‘[the PTA] … doesn’t have the same clout’ was how one parent put it. Parents reported contacting the chairperson of a school board if that person was known to them. Another parent, who was also a teacher, noted that she had made many informal contacts with her children’s school but parents also approached her for advice. She feared that teachers closed ranks when parents approached them to raise issues or problems. This again echoes the findings of previous research in which parents were reluctant to make complaints because of their relationship with the teacher and fear of repercussions for their child (SCC, 1994, p34). Other sources of information mentioned by participants included primary and secondary schools’ handbooks and prospectuses.

3.2 Local authorities

Speaking to local authority officials was the next option for most parents. Some were emphatic that they would go straight to the Director of Education if information and advice was insufficient at school level. One group revealed that there had been a parents’ adviser on the local council until funding cuts removed the post. In another group, the local authority advisory service was known only to one participant and that was because she was a council employee. Some participants recalled ‘something’ in the school prospectus about further information being available from the council. In contrast, home educators might seek advice from advisers within local authority education departments.
3.3 Where else?
Participants across all groups were able to list a range of organisations where they would go for independent information and advice or which they had used. Many responses were tentative and demonstrate a degree of uncertainty – a fact reported to be recognised by providers in the SCC survey (SCC, 1999). Participants also acknowledged that there was a difference between seeking general information and advice and dealing with specific issues which required a particular procedure or response for their resolution. One participant summed up the situation: ‘Is it not the case that if you don’t need these services, you don’t seek to find them?’

In discussion, participants mentioned the following sources of information and advice:

- libraries
- citizen’s advice bureaux
- lawyers
- social workers
- health visitors
- local welfare rights officers
- general practitioners for referrals and assessments
- Schoolhouse and other home education bodies
- local community relations officers
- Scottish School Board Association
- specialist voluntary organisations, eg the Autistic Society or Action Research
- parent support groups and individuals
- the Internet.

The participants from ethnic minority groups had mixed views on where they would go for advice. Some were adamant that their first point of contact was more likely to be their carer support group, social workers or the community relations office. There were clear reasons for this, including confidentiality and language barriers, which will be explored in the next chapter. One parent reported seeking advice from the school before contacting the Autistic Society for her son who had severe autism. Two favoured friends and voluntary groups:

*The social work department is the last place I’d go to... I go to friends or voluntary organisations first. I find them more independent, more likely to get a genuine answer than government organisation.*

*It is still the voluntary organisations where you find friends, and listening ears to speak to.*

One parent, who had very specific problems in accessing information and advice about special needs, had relied on the nursery and primary schools to complement information from the Enquire advisory service and the Internet.
Another described how she found out about a charity through a friend who had read a newspaper article about the condition from which her son suffered:

We had a suspicion that my son was suffering from a very mild disability but we were not sure and went to this teacher at the time ... and she kind of brushed us off ... he's fine. If the teacher thinks that then it must be right, but in actual fact it turned out much later that he did have something ... When we first had our suspicions we did contact Action Research, the charity, to get some leaflets...

In contrast, those who had chosen to educate their children at home were familiar with several sources of information and advice. Their main advice and support group was Schoolhouse although others such as the National Association for Gifted Children, the Scottish Network for Able Pupils and Education Otherwise were also mentioned.

Individual contacts were often useful sources of advice to parents. Sometimes a chance meeting with another parent would point parents in the right direction. As a result, one parent described seeking advice and an independent assessment from an educational psychologist. However, some parents believed that the informal network of passing on information at the school gates was in decline because of working parents and spoke of a ‘breakdown in communication’ and the absence of a ‘network of parents’.

3.4 Summary

In this section we have provided a picture of where parents go or are likely to go if they require educational information and advice. The main sources include:

- the local school
- local authority education departments
- a range of advice centres and voluntary organisations
- individual personal contacts
- information sources, such as libraries and the internet.

We also note that parental knowledge of sources of information and advice appeared to be vague and tentative in many instances. Few had heard of national helplines. There is therefore a need to consider parents’ knowledge and experience of independent information and advice services and how this impacts on their ease of access to advice services.
4 Do parents find it difficult to access independent advice?

In this chapter we present participants’ views of the barriers they have experienced in accessing educational information and advice both from within schools and from independent providers. Clearly, a knowledge of what is available in Scotland is required before parents can exercise choice. We will see that in many cases, our respondents lacked this basic level of information and therefore their choice was limited.

4.1 Barriers to accessing information and advice

Accessing information from schools

Most participants tended to seek advice from class teachers, subject or guidance teachers and headteachers before looking further afield. They relied upon teachers’ knowledge and expertise. However, sometimes, especially with reference to children with special educational needs and specific health conditions, they felt that teachers’ knowledge was not always sound.

Access to teachers might also present difficulties. Parents considered parents’ evenings were brief, allowing little time to address problems. Opportunities for informal contact with teachers varied. The exception appeared to be in the pre-school sector and parents appreciated the open-door policy which many nursery schools now operate. Parents also were more self-confident in seeking advice from pre-school staff.

Parents felt that access to primary school teachers varied: some found teachers approachable, while others reported that opportunities for informal contact declined as their children progressed through primary school. As one put it:

... you’re not dealing with the class teacher, not past Primary 1 or 2 because you’ll never see the class teacher. Because they’re not at the school gates, you never get to talk to them. And getting to ring in, it’s not the class teacher that you speak to.

Another parent believed that:

Lots of parents are reluctant to put pen to paper, they feel the more informal contact on the phone […] is better] plus it’s sort of more anonymous.

When she did write about an issue, her concerns were addressed but she noted:

… that’s sad because you’re articulate and willing to eventually take steps to address the balance… that shouldn’t happen. Things should be done on behalf of all children, not just because somebody can speak up for themselves or write.
Another parent who had often been approached by other parents because of her professional connections with education echoed this:

_I get approached by quite a number of parents... 'I've got such and such a problem, how do I deal with it.' And they're very often reluctant, even to take the informal step of saying to the head of the school or even the class teacher... can I have a word with you, because they don't have the confidence, the articulation or the feeling of any sort of relationship._

Most believed that the main difficulty for parents is in accessing information from schools about alternative sources of advice when the school itself can provide no more help. Few believed that schools would readily provide this information. In addition, few reported regularly visiting schools or collecting information leaflets from schools even if these were being made available.

**Accessing information from local education authorities**

As we saw in the preceding chapter, participants regarded education authority departments as the next best option for information and advice. But some parents felt that it would be difficult to speak to the appropriate person. As one put it:

_Not everybody's got the confidence to do that. Plus, there's no guarantee that you would necessarily get the Director on the other end of the phone. I mean it's like the doctor's receptionist... arm's length._

Others felt that they lacked the confidence to telephone a departmental official. They also doubted whether education departments could really give impartial advice given their role as main providers of education.

Parents’ unawareness of sources of independent advice, even when these were available, again emerged as a barrier to access. Some parents did not realise that their education authority actually provided an advice service.

Home educators in particular wanted advice from education authority advisers which would be free from any implied criticism of their decision to educate their children at home. In practice, they believed that they received a better service from advisers if they were of the same socio-economic group as the adviser and able to ‘speak their language’. Relationships tended to break down if education advisers stressed their regulatory role rather than offered parents practical information on the curriculum and available resources. This confirms earlier research on home education in Scotland (SCC, 2000).

**Accessing information from independent sources**

Participants who had considered or used sources of advice beyond school and education authority levels, identified several factors which might inhibit parents from seeking independent advice:
Opening hours and response methods
Inconvenient opening hours can be a barrier to access. Participants thought that agencies such as citizen advice bureaux (CABs) might be of help but were concerned lest their enquiries be met by an answering machine or a volunteer who was unable to provide an immediate answer. One parent who had called a CAB explained how:

They [CAB] help but they’re very difficult to contact, … I mean their opening hours are terrible.

Language barriers
Lack of information in appropriate languages is another barrier to parental access. Members of ethnic minority groups pointed out that often their access was dependent upon information being made available in languages other than English, and where this was not provided, they were inhibited by the cost of hiring interpreters. Even for participants whose first language was English, inappropriate or excessive use of jargon was perceived as off-putting.

Access to ICT
Participants in all the groups expressed a general concern about the growth in the use of information and communications technology. While all acknowledged its potential to communicate information quickly, many pointed out that not all parents had access to the Internet and could, therefore, be excluded from sources of information.

Other issues
Participants raised a variety of other issues concerning access including:

- reluctance to raise personal issues with advice services
- desire for anonymity
- concern that telephone conversations with advice providers might be recorded
- fear of repercussions for their children.

This last point was exemplified by one parent who explained how:

What you’re frightened of is you’re accentuating the problem for the child, is that you’re making it a bigger problem in the child’s eyes why you were doing this, whereas you’re trying to keep it at low level so they can cope with it.

In addition there was a reluctance to proceed with some matters:

You might decide your particular issue isn’t big enough an issue to approach a big organisation. I mean it might be something that people feel themselves it’s not really a big problem so better not bother them.
4.2 Perceptions of ‘independent’ advice

The groups also explored their perceptions of access to independent advice. There was a general view that if they required impartial advice parents would have to go beyond the school and the education authority, especially if they were raising issues about teachers. Despite this, one parent thought that most parents would be accepting of information from schools:

...you do take what the teacher or the head teacher tells you. I mean they're supposed to know things to do with educational development.

While another, whose sons had been excluded from school believed that:

Some schools would rather protect the reputation of the school rather than face the truth.

Another parent reported the difficulties she had in identifying genuinely independent sources of advice:

I mean if it's dyslexia and you went to a dyslexia society they've got a vested interest in giving you that information. But then it's what you want, so the fact that it's not impartial doesn't matter, whereas it might matter under certain other issues.

Parents who were educating their children at home, felt that they would get negative or biased information from schools and education authorities and preferred to use specialist advice providers, such as Schoolhouse.

4.3 Summary

The evidence from the focus groups shows that parents find it difficult to access information and advice services when:

• it is difficult for them to meet teachers
• they lack confidence or feel inarticulate
• there are language barriers
• there are delays in responding to their enquiries.

There were mixed views on the nature of ‘independent advice’. Many participants doubted whether schools or education authorities could provide genuinely impartial advice but were largely unaware of alternative sources. The next chapter considers how parents prefer to access information and advice.
5 Parental preferences and next steps

In this chapter, we explore parents’ perceptions of provision, draw together the main themes to emerge from the study and suggest further areas of investigation.

5.1 Provision of information and advice

Participants engaged in lively discussion about how they preferred to access information and advice and no one means of getting information and advice was preferred. Parents recognised that the nature of specific problems would influence choice of advice provider. Overall, most participants favoured local rather than national sources but did not exclude seeking advice from national agencies to help resolve specific difficulties. Given the small numbers in the study, this must not be taken necessarily to represent the views of other parents, especially those who have sought independent advice more actively.

However, most agreed that the status quo did not meet their needs and that more guidance would be useful. As one parent explained, ‘You’re not necessarily looking for the answer, you’re looking for the direction on where to go’.

Local level

Many participants preferred support provided locally and made suggestions as to how advice services at that level could be developed. These included:

• an information officer or designated person (eg a school board volunteer) to deal specifically with queries from parents in the school or cluster of schools

• an independent mediator for complaint procedures

• greater publicity of independent advice sources in leaflets, posters, packs, school handbooks and prospectuses and parents’ evenings

• more information in the school prospectus, especially about transition phases from pre-school to primary and primary to secondary school

• regular updating of information on sources of information and advice in school prospectuses and handbooks

• more opportunities for parents and young people to have informal contact with schools.

Why did many parents favour the local approach? Most believed that local knowledge was necessary to the resolution of their difficulties. Three parents, typical of others, indicated that:

If it was a local person to deal with local people then you might be more inclined to approach them about that something.

They’ve got to know the information, they’ve got to know it for a local area.

You tend to feel that your problem is going to be dealt with better in a local level than on national level.
In contrast, one parent felt that she might be inhibited from raising personal issues about her son’s learning difficulties with a local contact for fear of stigmatisation of her son in the community. In addition, some believed that complaints about individual teachers or schools were better dealt with outwith the immediate environs of the school: 'If it was somewhere else it would just break down a barrier' was how one parent put it.

Others suggestions to improve advice services included:

• extending contact hours
• establishing centres modelled upon councillors’ ‘local surgeries’
• providing information in libraries
• establishing ‘drop-in’ centres for families with children with special needs.

Members of ethnic minority groups expressed reservations about whether a national telephone helpline would be able to provide information in a diversity of languages. They preferred support locally from support groups or community relations officers.

**National level**

There was some support for the development of a national telephone helpline which could offer a one-stop ‘advice shop’ for parents wishing to discuss educational matters. Some thought that it should be divided into different stages to address the disparate needs of children in pre-school, primary, and secondary sectors. Those who were educating their children at home stressed the need for anonymity. Even those who emphasised the need for local solutions saw some value in creating a national advice service and most believed a tiered advice service would best meet the needs of parents.

Other suggestions for improvement include:

• providing information roadshows at shopping centres
• promoting information about educational issues more generally
• establishing government websites similar to the one provided by the Department for Education and Employment in England and Wales. It could include links to advice giving organisations such as Schoolhouse and Education Otherwise.

5.2 **Summing up**

Relatively few participants had used independent advice services and some had no direct experience of the range or quality of provision. Many parents in our groups were unaware of existing sources of educational information and advice. This conclusion echoes those of earlier research studies (SCC, 1994 and SCC, 1999). Lack of knowledge is therefore, itself, a barrier to parents accessing independent information and advice.

Parental knowledge of sources of information and advice appeared to be related to parents’ experiences of needing advice. In general, the greater their need, the more informed parents were likely to have become. When parents did seek information and advice, it was initially at the local level from schools and education authorities and related to specific issues and problems. They may then move beyond the local if their problems remain unresolved.
In summary, then:
• most participants showed little knowledge of sources of educational information and advice; and
• their knowledge of independent sources of advice varied but was largely dependent upon whether they had had cause to use the services themselves.

5.3 Further investigation
As most of the participants had no direct experience of seeking independent information or advice we suggest there is a need to study parental needs and knowledge of advice providers in Scotland more fully. A larger-scale survey would identify:
• the extent of parents’ needs and knowledge
• the adequacy of provision
• any mismatch between needs and provision.
A survey could be illustrated with case studies of exemplars of good practice which other providers could emulate. In addition, groups not covered by our pilot study, ie homeless families, refugees, and children being educated in the independent sector, might be included.
It is likely that no single model of information and advice provision will meet all needs. A structural approach assumes that parents move first from school, to local authority, then national level when seeking advice. But this may not accord with how parents behave. From the evidence collected here it would seem that parents may well employ a wide range of personal contacts and networks and seek information in an informal, local or apparently haphazard way by utilising their various contacts. Such a network of information and advice may be complex and include many providers but might reflect more closely the reality of parental behaviour and preferences. It also offers variety to meet disparate needs.
Use of the Internet by parents in seeking information may also increasingly be worth exploring. Patterns of preferred ways of seeking advice and information might also be explored through a larger sample of parents.

5.4 Final comment
Our starting point for this report was the assumption that parents have an increasingly important role to play in their children’s education. However, we must also recognise that relationships between home and school, however good, may sometimes break down and parents may require independent information and advice to help resolve the resultant difficulties. In presenting these findings, we hope that new avenues will develop to help parents become more informed about available sources of information and more knowledgeable of ways in which independent advice may be accessed.
References


Glossary: sources of advice

The following list provides the names of the information and advice providers mentioned by the focus group participants and other respondents.

Action Research
Childline
Citizens’ Advice Bureaux (CABx)
Education Otherwise
Enquire (Children in Scotland)
Home Education Advisory Service
National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC)
Parentline (Children First)
Schoolhouse Home Education Association
Scottish Network of Able Pupils (SNAP)
Scottish Parenting Network
Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA)
Scottish School Board Association (SSBA)
Appendix 1

Parents’ Focus Groups - Topic Guide

_preamble and introduction_
We are going to talk about a few areas to do with getting information and advice about education.

I would like to start by asking:

1a. _Where have you been for information and advice about education? (their experience)_
    to an individual?
    the nursery or school?
    local authority/council?
    An organisation? eg

1b. _Are there other sources which you have not used yourself but that you are aware of? (knowledge)._ 

2a. _Why did you need advice? (experience)_

2b. _Are there other reasons why parents might need advice? (knowledge)_

Reasons for looking for information and advice
Could be eg :
- admissions/placing requests
- attendance
- custodial rights
- exclusions
- bullying problems
- special educational needs
- transport
- attitude/conduct of teaching staff
- school boards
- pre-school education
- home education
- other issues

When do you involve advice agencies?
- Is there a lack of independent advice services?
- Is it impartial advice or biased?
3a. **How did you find out about getting information and advice? (experience)**
   How do you go about it?

3b. **Are there other ways that you know about but may not have used? (knowledge)**

4a. **Did you find it difficult to get access to independent advice? (experience)**
   Is it easy to access the information and advice? Once you get to an agency...
   jargon?
   geographical - too far away?
   Resources?
   Not knowing rights?

4b. **What about other parents, do you think it is difficult for them to get access? (knowledge)**

5. **What kind of advice have you found most helpful?**
   What are your views on advice you have received?
   Did it change your relationship with the school or local authority?

5b. **What about others?**
   What kind of advice do you think parents will find most helpful?

6. **What do you think are the best ways to get independent advice?**
   How do you prefer to get advice?
   Telephone service?
   Local agencies?

**Concluding comments**
Thanks and usual reassurances.