



talking
futures
Engaging parents in
young people's choices

TOOLKIT FOR EDUCATORS

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WELCOME TO TALKING FUTURES



Talking Futures is a suite of resources designed by the Gatsby Foundation, to help educators in England support parents to have constructive careers and education conversations with their children.*

A fundamental principle of *Talking Futures* is that good careers guidance is the key to social mobility. It provides young people – whatever their social and family background – with the skills and information they need to make empowered and positive decisions about their future education and careers options.

But good careers guidance cannot be delivered in isolation from young people's families. Parents are widely accepted as an influential force on young people's decision-making, as are extended members of their family and other people within their network.

Through your own experiences, you will be aware that engaging parents in any area of school or college life is not always straightforward: there is no one-size-fits-all approach. When it comes to encouraging them to engage with careers and education conversations, both with the school or college, or with their children, some may be strongly supportive of your activities and keen to explore, while others may have limited understanding about today's education options and careers pathways. Others may feel disengaged or lack confidence in having careers conversations with their children or have significant pulls on their time and resources at home to sufficiently engage.

* Throughout the *Talking Futures* materials, the word 'parent' is used to refer to parents, carers and guardians and other influencers you may want to involve.

WELCOME TO TALKING FUTURES

The content is based on research commissioned by Gatsby to explore how best to provide information and support to parents via schools and colleges, to help young people make informed careers and education decisions.

About this toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help schools and colleges maximise the effectiveness of their parental engagement around careers and education decision making, and increase participation from parents.

The toolkit is primarily aimed at Careers Leaders in schools and colleges, as well as those that support them, such as the wider Senior Leadership team, careers professionals, subject department leads and SENCOs.

Talking Futures' suite of resources include; ideas for CPD, tools and activities for use at parents' evenings, tailored family learning events, and other opportunities both remotely and in person. Schools and colleges can choose activities that will complement their existing provision to ensure every young person, supported by their parents, has the tools they need to make informed choices to unlock their future. An overview of the activities available is included in this toolkit and more detail on delivering them and all the resources required can be found on [The Careers & Enterprise Company Resource Directory](#).





THE GATSBY BENCHMARKS

The Gatsby Foundation (Gatsby) is the philanthropic trust of David Sainsbury (Lord Sainsbury of Turville). The trust focuses on six areas, one of which is education: specifically, technical education.

Through its efforts to support and improve technical education, Gatsby identified that the wider career guidance system needed to be addressed to ensure that all young people are aware of, and ideally capitalise on, the range of options available and best suited to them.

Gatsby's work to identify benchmarks for what good career guidance looks like, led by Sir John Holman, has provided a much welcome framework and the trust continues to ensure that its findings underpin the national Careers Strategy and are embedded in the practice of all schools and colleges.

The eight [Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Career Guidance](#), which all secondary schools and colleges in England follow are:

1. [A stable careers programme](#)
2. [Learning from career and labour market information](#)
3. [Addressing the needs of each pupil](#)
4. [Linking curriculum learning to careers](#)
5. [Encounters with employers and employees](#)
6. [Experiences of workplaces](#)
7. [Encounters with further and higher education](#)
8. [Personal guidance](#)

Parental involvement is explicitly referenced in the guidance for achieving several Gatsby Benchmarks, but the degree of parental engagement around careers and education options varies from one school or college to another. Along with supporting young people to make more informed choices, engaging with parents in a more strategic way could help institutions meet the eight Benchmarks.

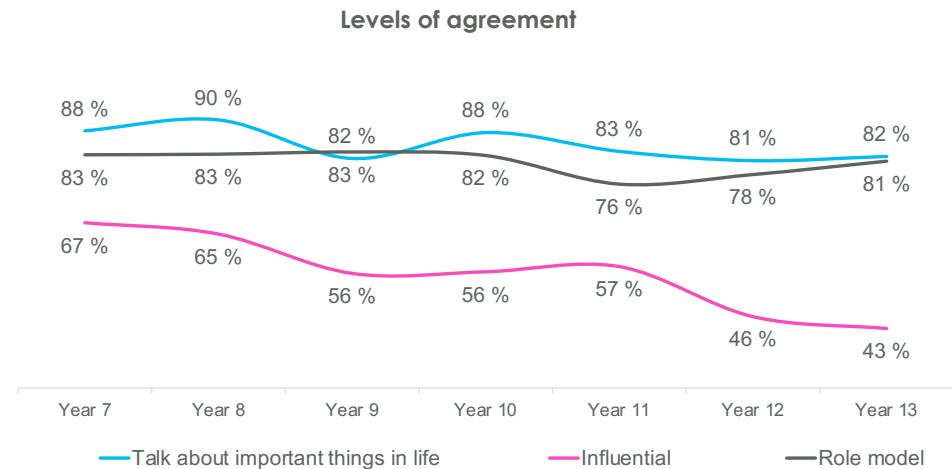
PARENTS AND CAREERS DECISION-MAKING

Parents are well-known to have an influence on young people around careers and education decision-making.

Recent Gatsby-funded research into parents' views on careers education carried out in 2019 shows that parents believe children should take their views into account when making important decisions, however, some underestimated the influence they could have on their child's choices.

These conversations around key decisions were shown to start as early as Year 7, well before they noted receiving information on choices from their children's school or college. They like to feel involved and informed, and even as young people grow older and parental influence declines, they do continue to talk about the important things in life with their children.

After year 11 less than half of parents feel influential



*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements' Base: 2,050 UK parents of 11-18 yr olds



PARENTS AND CAREERS DECISION-MAKING

Four in five parents note actions taken as a result of conversations with their child about career options

Conversations with children

24% say their child did further research about career options

22% did further research with their child about career options

18% did further research about career options

15% say their child spoke to their school or college about career options

12% spoke to the school or college with their child about career options

What was the result of the last conversation you had with your child about their career options?
Base: 1,949



of Employment Research (2019), found that parental engagement is important for supporting the development of:

- **Information-seeking and research behaviours**
- **Self-efficacy, career decision-making and confidence**
- **Planning, goal-setting and creating a sense of direction**
- **(Career) adaptability, flexibility and employability skills (such as entrepreneurship and team working skills).**

There are other benefits to involving parents. Most schools and colleges will have identified that, as members of the local community, parents can be a useful resource. Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6 call for young people to have encounters with employers and employees, as well as experiences of workplaces. Parents may have a personal understanding of the local labour market and some may be able to provide such encounters and experiences for young people.

The impact of these conversations can be seen in new research, carried out in Autumn 2020, which indicates that four in five parents note action was taken as a result of their conversations with children about career options.

When parents are involved, the benefits of their engagement in supporting decision-making around careers and options are well-evidenced. Another piece of research supported by Gatsby, and carried out by Warwick Institute

It is also possible that improving parental engagement around careers may act as a hook for other types of parental engagement and lead to whole-school or college benefits, such as attendance and even attainment.

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

In recent years, the education and careers landscape has transformed. There is no guarantee that the stages, options and considerations that were relevant when parents left education are still the same today.

As a result, some parents may have a partial understanding of the variety of education pathways which lead to different occupations and could potentially hold misconceptions about the value of different routes and the reality of jobs and industries. Yet we know from research carried out in 2020 that parents predominantly rely on their own experiences to inform discussions about careers and options.

Therefore, as well as ensuring young people have access to accurate, up-to-date information about the careers and education options available, parents must equally be engaged and informed to enable them to provide support. Gatsby Benchmark 2 states that every pupil and their parents should have access to good quality information about future study options and labour market opportunities. Parents should be encouraged to use this type of information to support their children directly and generate questions to explore further with their school or college.

Parents therefore need to know:

- Each stage in brief and its decision points
- The routes available at each stage
- The implications of each route
- Historic national and institution-level data on the number of young people choosing each route
- Further career and labour market information

Explaining careers provision today

Research carried out in 2020 indicates that 40% of parents believe their experience of career guidance at school was very bad or bad, however, there have been significant positive changes in careers provision in recent years. It's worth being aware that if parents' own experience was poor, some may retain a negative attitude towards what careers teams are doing, so it is important in your work to raise the profile of your school or college careers offer.

It's strongly recommended you explain how careers provision works today and what support is offered by your school or college – both in terms of what their children will experience but also where they can go to get information. This message should be covered in early interactions with new parents and reinforced through all careers activities as a reminder of the support available.



UNDERSTANDING PARENTS

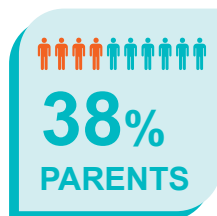
To understand parents' behaviour better and support schools and colleges to work with those in most need of support, Gatsby's 2019 research identified several different groups of parents based on a number of measures, including their attitude towards school and college careers provision. Follow up research in 2020 highlighted some variations in these groups, likely to be as a result of the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

While most schools and colleges will see every type of parent the research identified, socio-economic factors mean that some parent groups may be concentrated in certain areas.

The activities and ideas offered as part of *Talking Futures* can be added to institutions' existing parental engagement provision and tailored to different parent groups. Through a mixture of broad and targeted interventions, an institution's parental engagement strategy can effectively be developed to meet the nuanced needs of its parent community.

Parent Group 1

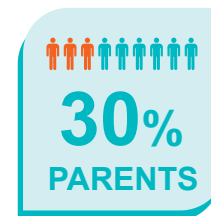
Around four out of 10 parents identified in Gatsby's 2019 and 2020 research are content to take a backseat in decision-making, but would be happy to be involved by schools and colleges. They often have strong relationships with their children and their faith in the system or their children means that they trust that the right choices about their children's future will be made.



Given the influence they have on their children and the ease of reaching them, schools and colleges may be able to have a significant positive impact on this group by encouraging them to understand the value of their role in helping young people make decisions.

Parent Group 2

Around a third of parents are highly engaged in their children's decision-making. They tend to be educated to A level or degree-level themselves, they talk to their children regularly about careers and they have high expectations of them. However, some may have misconceptions or a limited understanding of the choices available to young people today, especially around technical education and careers.



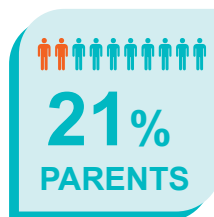
This group of parents are very open to what schools and colleges offer them. Subject – or interest – specific events may provide food for thought and serve to dispel myths about particular routes.

UNDERSTANDING PARENTS



Parent Group 3

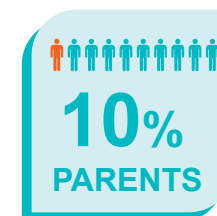
One group of parents in need of particular support from schools and colleges are those who have quite a distant relationship with their children and/or minimal engagement with the school or college. They may lack confidence and knowledge, and their communication skills, coupled with fear, may hold them back from seeking help. This group made up just over 10% of parents in the 2019 research and 21% of parents in 2020.



Personalised activities tailored to their needs may overcome many of these barriers, such as preparation workshops in advance of whole-year careers evenings to give them confidence to talk about options and ask questions. Collaborative learning events may serve as safe and supportive spaces where young people and their parents can explore different routes together.

Parent Group 4

Another group in need of support are those who are highly anxious about their children's future. They are receptive to engagement from schools and colleges, but the format or frequency of current careers and option provision may not be appropriate for them. This may be compounded if they or their children have additional needs. This group made up around 10% parents in the research.



This group will respond well to small-group activities which provide an opportunity to voice their concerns and tackle the specific issues their children face. As well as personalised events, follow-up sessions with careers advisers may be useful, where possible, to provide relevant support.

GOOD PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Research carried out by the [Warwick Institute of Employment Research \(2019\)](#) explored how best to provide information and support to parents via schools and colleges to help young people make decisions.

This research, combined with the findings on different parent groups and their needs, has been translated into 11 practical recommendations. These recommendations can be used by Careers Leaders and SLT to reflect on your institution's current parental engagement activities to explore how potentially small adjustments can be made to maximise impact. For schools and colleges wanting to create a parental engagement strategy for your work in careers, these can act as a structure to follow.

Support with implementing these recommendations can be found through the activities and resources provided as part of the *Talking Futures* materials. They are specifically designed to address these recommendations and the needs of the different parent groups identified in the research. All materials include guidance for virtual delivery too.

1. Provide timely careers information

Evidence shows parents begin conversations with their children on careers choices early. For example, in schools this can be from Year 7. This highlights the need to provide supporting information to parents as soon as a student joins a school or college. Signposting to the support a school or college can offer to parents around career guidance during the student transition process is important, and should be reiterated frequently.

2. Build on current parental engagement

The research found that it is highly effective, in developing a parental engagement strategy around careers, to make use of and extend existing communication channels between parents and the school or college. Parents' forums, links with parent governors and other parental involvement activities can all be developed to engage parents in young people's careers and education choices, and share success stories about careers provision.

3. Co-create with parents

If you don't already consult parents and shape your careers activities around their needs and concerns, you may find this drives informed and supportive interest. The most effective parental engagement strategies involve planning, collaboration and continuous improvement using parent feedback. This supports Gatsby Benchmark 1 in which a stable careers programme is developed through evaluation and improvement.

4. Create a parent-friendly environment

Consider organising smaller group activities in different locations and at times of the day when parents are likely to be available, such as breakfast meetings, evening careers guidance sessions or coffee clubs. These can increase engagement by making parents feel more welcome at school or college.

5. Build trust with socially-disadvantaged families

When planning activities, think about different parent groups and how to reach them. The research found that communication with the hardest-to-reach parents needs to be targeted, personalised in terms of their needs and their children's interests and appropriate in terms of content and timing. Workshops with small numbers offer more opportunity for tailored support. You may want to consider specific aspiration raising activities that cover educational and personal development, such as those offered by third-sector organisations and charities.

GOOD PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

6. Refocus careers activities to involve parents

It's good practice to invite parents to existing activities such as careers fairs, open days and where appropriate their child's personal guidance session. You may also want to design new activities that engage parents, employers and the local community, such as 'meet the employer events', 'guess my job' and informational events on topics requested by parents. Section 5 of this toolkit provides an overview of the activities developed as part of *Talking Futures* which are all available online and can be used as a starting point for refocusing your provision.

7. Stimulate family conversations

Research shows that a shared understanding between parents and young people of young people's career direction is essential for progressing thinking and career development. Prompt students to discuss their careers and options choices with their parents. Workshops involving both parents and young people create a shared careers-related experience and can support future dialogue between the institution and the family.

8. Combine home and school or college

Starting activities in institutions which they then take home to complete has been effective at encouraging parents to get involved. Classroom teachers can play a key role by designing classroom and homework activities that promote careers discussions, particularly related to their subject areas. It also works well to target careers presentations from employers and education providers by subject, and involve the relevant teaching staff, as we know from the research that parents often prefer to speak to subject staff who know their child well, about their child's aspirations.

9. Offer a blended delivery

A combination of online and face-to-face activities have been found effective in reaching parents because the engagement takes place at a time in a form that suits parents. Technology can also be used to monitor engagement and determine what support is needed. The use of virtual support has been increased extensively over the past year with parents and students engaging via new channels, and learnings from what worked with your parent community for maintaining contact can be applied to your careers provision where needed.

10. Draw on parents as a resource

The research found that it's highly effective to involve parents in helping to deliver careers activities. Many will be employed, have good links to employers or run their own companies. If you don't make use of parents' expertise and experience in this way already, you may want to involve parents in targeted presentations, group discussions, or careers club activities to develop students' insights into the world of work. It's a good idea to keep renewing links with parents as each cohort goes through the school or college.

11. Involve the senior leadership team

If you're making changes to your careers provision, it's good practice to involve senior leadership and management in the design and planning of your activities, and, where possible, governors. Pulling together evidence for the impact of increased parental engagement in careers could help to secure buy in and potentially resource for interventions and activities. From taking a whole school/college approach, opportunities and efficiencies may be found where other parental engagement work is happening and support for family careers conversations could complement this without adding to staff workload.

ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES



As part of *Talking Futures* there are a range of activities available to support your school or college deliver on the recommendations from research. These fall into the following categories:

- **Getting started** – support for Careers Leaders in engaging SLT to audit your current provision and deciding on which activities will complement it, plus CPD materials to upskill your whole staff team in parental engagement in careers.
- **Parent facing activities** – a variety of broad and tailored activity plans for events you can run in person or remotely to support your parent community. All resources needed and tips for delivery are included – as well as links to the [good parental engagement principles](#).
- **Student facing activities** – a selection of short activities that can complement your existing careers programme that specifically reinforce the role their parent can play in their decision making and encourage them to seek out that support and initiate family conversations.

In addition, there are resources on the site to support educators and parents feel prepared and get the most out of the activities run by the school or college:

- **Information resources for educators and parents** – these include films and other content explaining the choices available plus signposting to external sources to find out more about education pathways and specific careers, further and higher education.
- **'At home' activities** – a selection of tools, tips and conversation starters for parents to support them improve the quality of their careers conversations with their children – these can be signposted to by the school or college before or after running events to encourage efforts to continue at home or used independently by families at their own pace.

Once you have decided which resources and activities to use to complement your existing provision, remember to make your careers programme available on your website. As part of meeting Gatsby Benchmark 1, your institution's whole careers programme should be available for parents to refer to, including the detail of what you offer each year group and how you incorporate student and parent feedback. You can find out more in the Gatsby Benchmark Toolkits for schools, colleges and SEND [here](#).

DELIVERY GUIDANCE

The activities on the Talking Futures site are designed for different scenarios. Once you have considered the needs of your student and parent community and identified any gaps in your existing provision, it is important to think about what type of event and method of delivery would be most appropriate.

- **For example, our family learning activities, such as the [Teamwork Challenge](#) that focuses on building skills together; might be most suitable for groups of parents where students have additional needs.**
- **You could choose a more information led activity such as the [Employer Panel](#) or [Parents Evening Presentation](#) to challenge parents who have biases about careers options that may be unhelpful.**

In person or virtual?

All the activities can be held virtually or in person. There is specific guidance for each activity, as appropriate.

Virtual meeting platforms might enable more parents to attend more sessions. It also means that they can revisit the recording at a time that suits them. However, it's important to consider literacy levels and the technology available to your parent audience.

It is best to keep functionality simple and use a platform that parents are familiar with through other school or college activities. Ensure a member of staff is in each breakout room to facilitate discussions and troubleshoot.

When you are carrying out activities in person, you can alleviate limited resources and resource-sharing restrictions through tech-based solutions such as software like Mentimeter or Kahoot. This allows families to use their phones to contribute their questions and feed back.

Communicating with parents in advance

You will need to communicate with parents several times about your activities to ensure maximum awareness. Research in 2020 identified that school/college websites, emails to parents, and children themselves are how

most parents expect to find out about careers guidance activities. After year 10, children themselves become the most common channel, making it critical that the information they receive is accurate and easily sharable with their parents.

It's best practice to use a combination of different communication channels, for example, a save-the-date communication could be sent via children and by email well in advance of the event to help increase the number of attendees.

Your next communication should help everyone get the most out of the event – as well as including date, timing and registration details. You could include detailed information to attract parents, such as employers who might be attending an event, or set some research activities for parents and children to do together in advance. Tailor information to suit the age and stage of the students.

We also suggest a reminder communication a day before the event to boost attendance. If the event is virtual, it's a good idea to give instructions about how to attend remotely, as well as information about how to use specific functionality.

DELIVERY GUIDANCE



Engaging with hard-to-reach parents

Some parent groups may be particularly hard to reach because they avoid social interactions and engagement with the school or college. They may also prefer not to speak on the phone and struggle to absorb large amounts of information. Some ideas to boost their engagement:

1. **Emails and communication via students are likely to be the most effective way of reaching these parents. It's useful to include messages about how much of a difference they can make and to be empathic about the issues they may be facing.**
2. **You may want to draw upon existing relationships between them and the school/college – such as the SEND department or pastoral teams – and get them to send the invitation.**
3. **Where appropriate consider inviting the whole household, including grandparents and younger and older siblings, to ensure families feel comfortable attending and to reduce barriers such as childcare.**
4. **You may want to use people they trust to facilitate activities with them, such as older students, school or college alumni, local community leaders or representatives from cultural or religious groups.**

Ensuring the visibility of the careers programme

Gatsby's 2020 research indicates that there has been a significant fall in how satisfied parents are with the support they receive from schools and colleges about students' careers and education options – with only 51% now feeling satisfied, compared to 60% in 2019. Parents also say they feel less informed than in the past.

Given the importance of parental influence on young people, here are some suggestions to increase the visibility of your careers programme:

1. **A logo to badge all careers and options related information to parents can help it stand out from other school/college-parent communication and regular recaps/updates on all activity that has taken place.**
2. **Ensure careers-related information arrives on a different day from other communications home.**
3. **Share images and stories of past careers events to celebrate success. You could post them on your institution's social media feed or even involve local media, as there will be an appetite for local good news.**
4. **If you do share images of parents and students or quotes, make sure you have the relevant permissions in place.**
5. **Follow up events with an email or article in your newsletter. Encourage families to continue careers conversations between events by setting mini activities and signposting them to additional resources.**

EVALUATING YOUR DELIVERY

Throughout the year, it's important to evaluate whether the Talking Futures activities have made a difference. You'll want to look at whether parental engagement with your institution has changed and at the support parents are providing their children.

Why collect evidence of parental engagement?

You know when something's gone well or badly, but would you be able to demonstrate that to someone else? And how do you make sure your judgement is objective? There are several reasons to collect evidence of work done to engage parents in your careers programmes.

- **Increasing impact:** understanding and demonstrating what is and is not working in order to change and improve
- **Internal monitoring and accountability:** reporting to the school/college's senior leadership team or the governing body and making it part of school/college improvement and leadership agenda

This detail can also be used in case studies to demonstrate your successes to others in your school/college

Two-stage evidence gathering

Many evaluations take a measure at the start of a programme of activity and again at the end. You can think of this as an audit carried out before and after a programme of activities are introduced.

Pre-measures: This involves taking a measure of whether your approach to engaging parents in careers is working, how well and what changes might be needed. It's worth considering it from two points of view: how are parents engaging with the school/college careers activities, and how are they supporting their children's decision making about careers and pathways:

- **Parental engagement with school/college:** For example, do parents know what information and support mechanisms are provided by the school/college, can and do they access this information and support, and are there effective ways to update them on any changes or developments and mechanisms for them to seek additional inputs and support, if required?
- **Parental engagement in their children's decision-making:** How, when and why do parents get involved and does this reflect what they would like? What support and information do they need to help their children's decision-making and how can they get this from the school/college?

Post-measures: After the activities have taken place you could take a repeat measure of how things are and what is/ isn't working as a result of new approaches or strategies. You can also capture parents' feedback about the activities they have engaged in.

We also recommend that you do some ongoing evidence collection which would enable you to gain much more fine-grained information about what does and doesn't work as you implement new activities and strategies. This detail can also be used in case studies to demonstrate your successes to others in your school/college.

EVALUATING YOUR DELIVERY

Possible evidence-gathering activities

In this section we have set out some evidence-gathering approaches that you might consider.

- A parental survey might be the most efficient way of capturing insight before and after your programme of activities. Examples of some questions you might want to include to assess the role parents play in their children's decision making and what this is influenced by are provided in the [Whole programme survey template download](#). CEC also has a suggested [survey template](#) for capturing parents' views of the school or college's careers programme.
- Capturing parental feedback on specific activities - this could be done using a short online survey of participants or paper-based feedback forms (see the [Activity survey template download](#) for some suggestions), but this needn't always be the case. A voting/exit-poll type activity at the end of the event can often be sufficient, particularly if combined with briefly interviewing a small selection of parents.

- Consulting with an advisory group of parents on a regular basis – this group should comprise a range of parents that reflect the profile of your students. You might also want to target particular groups, such as EAL parents or those with SEND children. Existing channels, such as PTA or parent governors, may also be of value here, but it will be important to reach out to new parents who have not been involved before.
- Gathering student views (e.g. via surveys, individual and group discussions) can provide insight into the support students receive, or would like to receive, from parents.
- Making use of your existing evidence, data and observations which could include:
 - parental evenings' attendance data, which could include analytics data from the careers pages on the school or college's website
 - observations from staff offering additional support to specific students
 - instances of misconceptions, stereotypes or lack of information having negative effects on students highlighted by form tutors or careers advisers.

A template for evidence collection

It's not necessary to measure before and after every single activity. However, it is useful to take a systematic approach to capturing data against a specific event. We would suggest that capturing evidence related to specific activities covers:

- **Reach:** how many parents participated in the activity and what was the profile of the parents taking part? How does this compare with previous activity? Were you able to involve more or different types of parents with the activity? Are there some groups of parents who don't engage and can you understand why?
- **Engagement:** how did parents respond to the activity? Were they engaged and active participants? Did they value content and did the format help or hinder their experience?
- **Outcomes:** what did participants learn? How do they intend to use the information from the session and how is this likely to impact on their child's decision making?
- **Improvements:** what changes would participants like to see and how would these help?