



## Family Engagement in Education

### Understanding Remote Indigenous Families

#### **Background**

An evaluation conducted of the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) found that **family engagement in their child's education is a principal influence on students' attendance at school**. Familial engagement can either be enhanced or deterred by the relationship these families have with their child's school. Therefore, forming genuine relationships with a student's family can be the driving factor of a student's attainment of Year 12. Most importantly, there is no universal strategy to forming essential relationships with student's families.

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# Family Engagement in Education

## Understanding Remote Indigenous Families

*“To improve school attendance it is important to understand that there are different families who will need, perceive and react to the help and support of programs... differently” (RSAS, 2018)*

### Overview

An evaluation study conducted of the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) found that **family engagement in their child’s education is a principal influence on students’ attendance at school**. Familial engagement can either be enhanced or deterred by the relationship these families have with their child’s school. Therefore, forming genuine relationships with a student’s family can be the driving factor of a student’s attainment of Year 12. Most importantly, there is no universal strategy to forming essential relationships with student’s families.

### Four Main Family Types

**Each student’s familial circumstances are unique and require specialised attention based on their distinct needs.** Through a series of interviews, the evaluation identified four basic family types to help schools and service providers better understand the needs of student’s families. These main family types are designed to be used as a guide to tailor support strategies to family’s unique contexts, as well as foster genuine relationships that will benefit the child while they are at school. The four family types are:

- **Committed Families**
- **Protective Families**
- **Unsure Families**
- **Disconnected Families.**

Additionally, any of these families can experience **Complex Life Events** that requires specialised attention.

### About the RSAS Evaluation Report

In 2018, the RSAS published an evaluation report *“Understanding family perspectives of school attendance in remote communities: Evaluation of the remote school attendance strategy.”* The report was intended to improve the Remote School Attendance Strategy program that is being used in Remote and Very Remote Communities to help raise school attendance rates. The research found that **certain services can become enablers or barriers to families and the education system depending on their familial context.** The information therefore presents a useful framework that can be used by all schools affiliated with educating students from Community.

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# Committed Families

**Key concern:** Their child's education and their autonomy as parents/ caregivers

**Committed families have a generally positive attitude towards education as they believe it will provide better employment outcomes for their children.** These families respond well to positive reinforcement but occasionally need practical support. They understand how the school system works and have good knowledge over what services are available to them and are confident in asking for help if required.

## Barriers

There are few to no barriers in Committed Family environments that might prevent their children from going to school. These families believe the school and their community to be a safe place. Education is normalised in their peer group and most parents take their kids to school before work. As such, **insensitive conduct by schools and services can in and of themselves become barriers to Committed Families.**

## Effective communication with Committed Families

Committed Families respond well to positive reinforcement and being kept up to date with their child's progress at school. They are receptive to clear information about available services and respond well to using these services at their own liberty.

## Ineffective communication with Committed Families

It is important not to undermine Committed Families by offering too much support. It is equally important not to shame Committed Families for their preferred way of life as this causes resentment towards services, ultimately impacting the student's relationship to the school. Committed Families want to be involved in their child's education so excluding them from activities and key events can negatively affect the parent's attitude towards the school and/or relevant services.

## Summary

It is important to positively reinforce Committed Families to continue their engagement with their child's education. Likewise, it is important not to undermine their parenting by imposing on them the availability of services.

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# Protective Families

**Key concern:** the safety of their children

**For Protective Families, it is more important to keep their child safe than to send them to school.** Generally, these families value education but fear that their children will be physically or emotionally bullied or are unsafe in the care of external services. If a parent perceives any threat to their child's safety, they will be unlikely to send them to school. As such, these families generally require assurance over the safety of their children.

## Barriers

Protective Families have a fundamental mistrust in services' ability to protect their children.

## Effective communication with Protective Families

Protective Families are more likely to send their children to school if they are sure their children will be happy and safe when on school premises. With the help of genuine relationships and the right services, Protective Families can become Committed Families once the threat to their child's safety is removed, both real and perceived. Genuine relationships with teachers and school staff play an important role in soothing the anxieties of Protective Families. Building these relationships requires careful communication over the wellbeing of their children and, where possible, inviting Protective Families onto the premise of the school can reduce these fears.

Protective Families respond well to external advocates (such as respected community members and Elders) for school's safety mechanisms. Likewise, it is important for Protective Families to see their child happy and having fun at school, whether this is done through photos or storytelling.

## Ineffective communication with Protective Families

Protective Families need to have their concerns validated. Dismissing their concerns can create mistrust and eventual disengagement between the family and schools. Instead, their fears must be addressed to help foster the trust that is essential to forming genuine relationships.

It is also important for education providers to be transparent about how their child is doing in school. Receiving false information, such as being told their child is safe from bullying but their child is coming home from school sad and unhappy, is also damaging to the relationship between Protective Families and schools.

## Summary

Fostering a genuine relationship with Protective Families will create the trust that is needed to keep their children happy in school.

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# Unsure Families

**Key concern:** mainstream education does not guarantee cultural safety

**Unsure Families are apprehensive about the value of mainstream education as these families prioritise the importance of traditional ways of life**, both for the wellbeing of their child and for the wellbeing of their communities. From the perspective of Unsure Families, mainstream education is unlikely to lead to jobs in the community. Family members are unlikely to have received formal schooling themselves. As a result, the education system is foreign and complex. Children of Unsure Families may be under the regular care of kin rather than their parents.

## Barriers

Unsure Families don't necessarily oppose mainstream education but they distrust its deliverance on cultural safety, believing it does not value or will actively undermine traditional ways of life.

## Effective communication with Unsure Families

For Unsure Families, earning trust, respect and developing rapport is paramount to forming genuine relationships that will support their child in school. These families respond positively to community role models and Elders. Therefore, Unsure Families are likely to engage best with staff members who exercise strong cultural competency or demonstrate cultural safety at the school. This includes exercising skills such as patience and non-judgemental listening. Unsure Families are more likely to engage in the school if the curriculum also reflects traditional Indigenous Values. It can be beneficial to show examples of local people who have used education to develop job aspirations. However, it is also important for communication to be framed in a way that ensures the families feel supported in their ways of life, rather than having foreign ideals imposed on them.

## Ineffective communication with Unsure Families

It is especially important to not tell Unsure Families what to do. When school staff communicate in any way that can be perceived as threatening (such as aggressive or disrespectful communication or displaying judgement), Unsure Families are less likely to support their child's mainstream education. Staff must not be dismissive of the value Unsure Families place on traditional ways of life when communicating with Unsure Families. Doing so will create conflict and can result in a loss of respect for school services and the rejection of mainstream education, leading to the end of child's schooling.

## Summary

Due to the fact that these families are unconvinced about the value of mainstream education, respectful and patient communication can help these families trust in the schools to educate their child without threatening their traditional ways of life. Employing school staff with strong cultural competency will make it easier for Unsure Families to engage with their child's school.

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# Disconnected Families

**Key concern:** overcoming external and internal barriers, the risk of feeling shame

**Disconnected Families generally support education as important for their child but face significant barriers that can prevent them from sending their child to school.** Disconnected Families can become Committed families if they have received the right kind of support and understanding.

These families tend to feel isolated and alone and are unlikely to ask for help from services as a means to avoid conflict, or because they feel ashamed. These families can be unsure of how the schooling system operates and are uncertain of how they/their children might fit into that foreign environment.

## Barriers

Disconnected Families may have significant barriers in their environment. These include:

- Living out of town
- Lack of accessible transport
- Inability to access the services that will connect them with their child in boarding school.
- Avoidant tendencies due to the risk of feeling shame
- Social barriers that prevent them from being involved in the broader community.

## Effective communication with Disconnected Families

Supporting Disconnected Families to understand how the school system operates and the benefits of school services is more likely to improve engagement with their child's education. This can be done by taking the time to introduce teachers and school staff to Disconnected Family members and explaining how things work to familiarise them with the foreign environment. It can also reduce fear around the unknown and empower families in their decision to send their child to school.

Warm and non-judgemental communication builds mutually respectful relationships that will likely increase the family's willingness to engage in their child's education. This can also increase receptivity to what the school and its services have to offer.

## Ineffective communication with Disconnected Families

Disconnected Families also have a high level of fear around being shamed. Conversely, these families are sensitive to being left out. Isolated families in particular can feel as though they are being ignored, threatened or judged and are therefore prone to resentment. Establishing a trusting relationship with these families can help soothe such anxieties.

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Forcing engagement with them, on the other hand, will create more mistrust and apprehension. Once this relationship has been established, removing the ambiguities in their child's education can be beneficial for Disconnected Families. This can be done by providing families with clear information about how they can access school services to avoid them feeling ashamed or embarrassed. Disconnected Families are unlikely to reach out unless a trusting relationship has been built first.

### Summary

Understanding the barriers that each Disconnected Family faces is key to building genuine relationships with them. This is most effectively done through careful and non-judgemental communication.

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# Complex Life Events

**Key concern:** tending to Complex Life Events often takes priority over education

## Overview

In addition to the aforementioned familial contexts, families can experience Complex Life Events that may interfere with their connection to their child's education. **Families who feel overwhelmed are unlikely to send their children to school or connect with their child's boarding education facilities.** Complex Life factors can include substance abuse, homelessness, domestic violence, anti-social issues, financial difficulties, family problems, child behaviour, physical and mental health and overcrowding. Complex Life Events require attention and interventions from a variety of support services. Schools can therefore act as a referral service to connect families with the help they need.

## Effective communication with families experiencing Complex Life Events

Communicating with families who are undergoing Complex Life Events is best done in a friendly and empathetic manner. Asking lots of open questions to understand what is going on will help these families feel supported. They will be more likely to take advice if they feel heard. Most families are also heavily influenced by authority figures who can offer them practical advice without making them feel ashamed. Early interventions are important because the longer the Complex Life Events grow, the less likely families are to seek help.

## Ineffective communication with families experiencing Complex Life Events

Families who are feeling shame will often avoid situations where they may feel embarrassed or be forced to talk about their issues. Likewise, Families experiencing Complex Life Events are likely to avoid interacting with any service that might judge them or be rude or agnostic towards them in their situation. These families may also be dealing with a high level of shame which worsens their situation by perpetuating anti-social behaviour.

## In summary

It is imperative to not shame or tell-off families who are experiencing Complex Life Events. Rather, actively listening to their situation to then offer relative services that may be of use to them is a more effective way to help these families.

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## Research Method

The research method gathered data through interviews with participating families. The participants responses were then grouped when displaying similar positive or negative responses to the contextual factors presented in the research process. Those that responded similarly were grouped together based on what they responded best to, and what turned them away from services that were available to help them keep their children in school.

## For more information

*Understanding family perspectives of school attendance in remote communities: Evaluation of the remote school attendance strategy, 2018*

<https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/rsas-evaluation-report.pdf>

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