

# It's not just the children who need self-esteem – it's parents as well

LES WALTON says we must stop treating parents and pupils as a homogeneous group who will respond to a single strategy

**A** RECENT headline in the Times read "Fine parents who don't read to children says schools chief".

Sir Michael Wilshaw the Chief Inspector for Schools reminded us again that when he was a headteacher "this is what he did".

Many of my colleagues who are serving or former heads have a mantra. "Never say ... this is what I used to do". Why? Because we probably didn't.

Anyway Michael is saying that we should challenge parents who clearly don't care about their children's education by letting them stay off school, taking them on holiday in term time or not turning up to parents' meetings.

Our Chief Inspector is partly right. We do need to challenge parents who do not value education. I do believe parents should turn up for school meetings and insist on their children going to school.

However things are not that simple.

As educationalists we must take some responsibility. My mother never attended the schools I went to. She was too apprehensive of the power and importance of the headteacher and staff.

The schools in my day did not encourage parents to turn up. Schools considered their role was 'in loco parentis' - to be 'in place of parents'. The school might have well placed a big sign outside the school gates saying 'keep out'. In my early days in education many headteachers would love to have had a 'keep out' sign for everybody.

Today schools make remarkable efforts to engage with parents and the community. As well as the traditional open days and parent teacher associations, there are celebration assemblies, parents learning alongside their children, homework clubs open to parents, e-newsletters, text messaging, Twitter, parent feedback sites. I could go on... and on.

In 1971 along with my appointment as a pastoral head in a newly



► Children play truant – and sometimes their parents are complicit. But does fining the parents really make any difference?

formed comprehensive school came a new responsibility to link with other professionals such as local authority advisers, social services, education welfare officers (EWO) and education psychologists.

My first meeting with an educational psychologist was rather embarrassing as I didn't really know the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist. This was a difficult meeting as I had just left the truant officer or 'wag man' who was telling me that he was now to be called a welfare officer.

Then I had a shock. I discovered that social workers, EWOs and psychologists, compared to my understanding, had a much deeper insight into many aspects of my children and the context within which they lived.

My first education psychologist was great fun to work with. I would say "good morning" and, looking me straight in the eyes, he would say "what do you mean by that?".

I grew to admire and respect these indispensable colleagues. I particularly admired the education welfare colleagues who would be 'out in the field' dealing with complex and challenging issues.

When our welfare officers visited homes they often received wonderful and creative reasons for absence. "She is off with her leg", "He's under the doctor", "There was a wasp in the bathroom and he couldn't get dressed" or "His cat was on the roof".

Over the years the excuses would become more sophisticated... "Her alarm clock is solar powered and it was cloudy".

One of my EWO colleagues noticed a pattern of absence was occurring every week. A number of pupils were

off on Thursdays, but only if it rained or looked like rain. Eventually a mum admitted that Thursday was washing day and if it looked like rain the kids were needed at home ready to take in the washing.

On one particularly memorable home visit the child continued to hide upstairs while the welfare officer sat in the front room talking to the mother.

Half way through the explanation for her son's non-appearance which was "because the bedroom door was jammed", a dog wandered into the front room. The dog then stood by the fireplace and left a rather smelly 'deposit' on the carpet.

Unable to put up with the smell the EWO excused himself and walked out of the house. The mother then called to the EWO, "aren't you going to take your dog with you?" This story tells us a lot about the relationships between home and school, particularly about power and the self-confidence of many parents.

Would threats of prosecution or fines have worked in this case? Some parents may need the threat of a fine or court. However this must be the last resort.

We must stop treating parents and pupils as a homogeneous group who will respond to a single strategy.

My own grandparents, both working class, couldn't have been more different. One worked down the pit from the age of 12 years and could barely read, the other was a quarryman who loved Dickens and opera.

The big challenge is to give parents the confidence and self-esteem so they can work as partners with a school to achieve the best for their children.