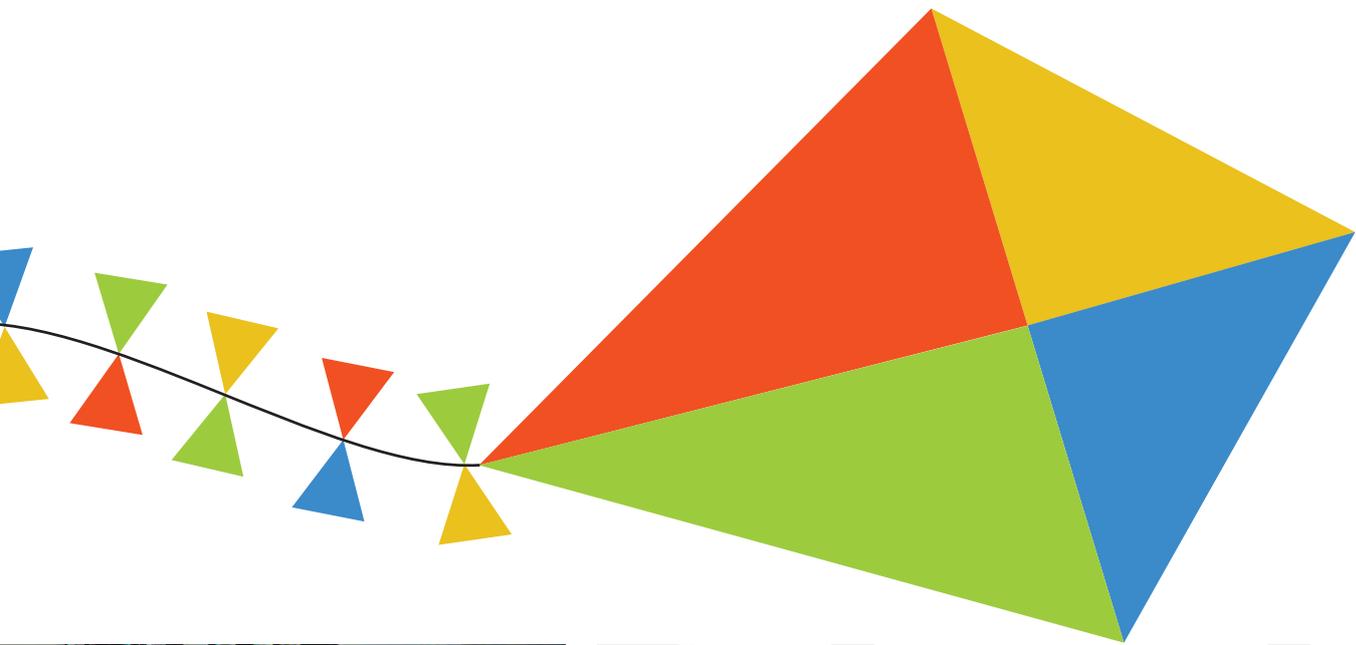


JIM WILEMAN





Bring the family

Every month, Coed Eva Primary in south Wales has an assembly for the whole household. It's the culmination of an activity programme designed to strengthen the family unit and bring school and home life closer together. **Méabh Ritchie reports**



Lauren Samways is in her second year at primary school, but only recently has her mother started doing the school run. It was not work or other commitments that stopped her, but her fear of what she might find at the school.

"You know when you read books and you've got the playground mafia – those parents who are all posh and look down their noses at you?" Mrs Samways asks. "I expected all that."

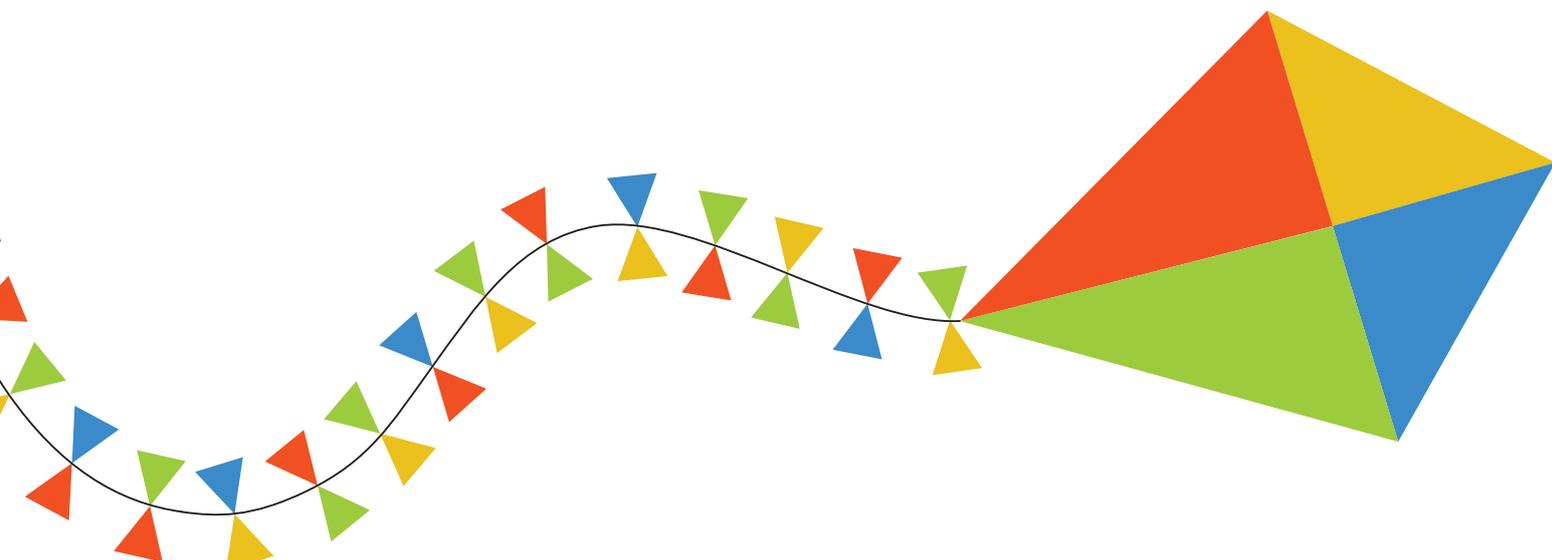
Her daughter is a pupil at Coed Eva Primary in Cwmbran, South Wales and her son attends the on-site nursery. Last month, Mrs Samways went to her daughter's school assembly without her husband for the first time.

"I wouldn't have done that normally – I have this thing about going anywhere on my own," she says. "But I knew Lauren would be really disappointed if I didn't

turn up. So I actually took my son to a café on my own until it was time to go back to the school. I couldn't believe I'd done that. It was such a big thing in our house, because I don't go anywhere on my own."

For the past year, the Samways family has been taking part in the school's Family Values programme – a scheme that aims to bridge the gap between school and families and provides practical ways to strengthen relationships within the family unit.

Each month, families are given activity packs that are centred on a particular value – "respect" or "honesty", for example – and can opt to do value-related tasks or games, for which they get a number of points. At the end of each month, the families get together for a "mega-challenge" activity at the school and rack up their points to see if they will be getting a gold, silver or bronze rosette at the monthly Family Values →



assembly. Last month's value was "freedom" and the mega-challenge saw each family build and decorate a kite before flying it in the playground.

Not only has it given Mrs Samways and other parents the confidence to come to school and engage more with teachers and other parents, but the scheme has improved pupils' behaviour and attendance.

It is a big claim, but one that Gill Ellis, headteacher at Coed Eva, makes wholeheartedly. "It's basically about breaking down barriers," she says. "It was created initially to improve relationships, not just within the family but between home and school. If families are having problems at home now, the parents are much more likely to give us a call."

Family Values came out of a meeting of minds between Mrs Ellis and Nicola Morgan, a primary school behaviour consultant. When Mrs Ellis became headteacher at the beginning of 2009, she oversaw the amalgamation of the separate infant and junior schools. The school had been through a period of change and some parents were unhappy with the way that some things had been handled in the past. Mrs Ellis wanted to make the school more approachable.

She also began Coed Eva's transition to a value-based school in September 2009, meaning that each month, assemblies and Seal (social and emotional aspects of learning) activities are themed around one of 22 values over a two-year period. Mrs Ellis wanted to find a way of introducing the values to the family home so that pupils had a seamless structure between home and school, and that both had a similar ethos.

Ms Morgan was brought into the school

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Gill Ellis, Coed Eva Primary

early on to tackle the poor behaviour that was rife after the amalgamation. She works with disruptive children until their behaviour has improved and they are able to go back to their class.

After only a couple of months, both Ms Morgan and Mrs Ellis realised that getting parents engaged would not only be crucial to the future of the school but also to individual pupils' development. They were both aware that families who did not have the opportunity to spend time together were more likely to become isolated from school and from each other and they decided to create a practical programme to try to help.

"A lot of parents don't spend quality one-to-one time with their child very often," says Ms Morgan. "With Family Values, you make sure you spend quality time and you can discuss things that happen throughout the day.

"When you're doing an activity, it feels much easier to talk about things. And that is what we wanted to do with Family Values – to strengthen families at home, and strengthen the link between school. And, of course, behaviour is part of that."

The Samways family had moved house a few times just before they started the Family Values scheme in September 2009

and Mrs Samways felt the family as a whole was quite unsettled. "The way our household was, it wasn't very structured," she says. "We just didn't feel together, like a team. It was just like living with three separate people, really – my husband and the two kids – but Family Values is based around team work. It made us pull together and communicate better."

She says both her children are calmer as a result and it has given her ideas for behaviour management at home. "We were able to bring in star charts and rules. It helped us to put a bit of structure into our lives," she says.

The advantage of the scheme is that all the activities – whether it is building a scarecrow, writing a story book or just having a chat about the chosen value – are initiated by the parents and children, and not imposed by someone else. "It's not like parenting classes because we don't dictate what activities they do," says Mrs Ellis. "They decide and it then becomes embedded into their family life."

There was some initial scepticism, however. Some parents felt the school was checking up on what was happening at home. Diane Hambley, a mother of three, was not keen on the self-assessment aspect of the log books and the requirement to write down and take photos of what they have done as a family. "I've always done that stuff – making sure we spend time together and thinking about family values – and I didn't like the idea of physically documenting what we would do anyway," she says.

But Alicia, her six-year-old daughter, would not take no for an answer. "The more involvement from me and her dad the better, as far as she's concerned," says Ms Hambley. "She loves to document it all and draw what we've done. I see it as



Last month's 'value', freedom, saw families building and flying their own kite

an extension of what we do anyway and some of the ideas are things I haven't thought of before."

As a result of the monthly gatherings, Ms Hambley feels she has got to know other parents much better. "The mega-challenge is always a good laugh," she says. "I might seem quite outgoing, but I'm quite reserved around people I don't know. When you get together at the school, you do get to know more people."

Getting parents on side gives teachers "the strength of 10", says Tom Bennett, teacher and author of *The Behaviour Guru* and behaviour consultant on the TES online forum. If parents feel they can trust teachers and approach them about problems, this has a positive impact on the pupils and their behaviour, he says.

"For some children, school is a discrete compartment of their lives where they can express themselves in a way impossible at home," says Mr Bennett. "As a teacher, you find that your power of sanction suddenly extends all the way back to their dining table and for some kids, that's often all it takes for them to realise that their conduct at school is part of their life just as much as their conduct at home."

Parents at Coed Eva are from a variety of backgrounds – some are working professionals, some might be separated or

single parents, and some are living in socio-economic deprivation. But Family Values works on the principle that all families could benefit from spending more time together, regardless of their backgrounds.

This principle is not explicit in the packs the families are given to introduce the project, however, as it could be seen as patronising and interfering. Instead, the focus is on the value and the activities. It also helps that the deputy head and some of the other teachers get involved and take part with their own families.

What Sue Morgan likes about Family Values is that there is no pressure to do it every month or to "go for gold" each time. Even though she has not been able to take part in recent months, she has kept up some of the activities with her three sons. "Doing things together makes them a bit calmer, so it doesn't stress me so much," she says. "It's nice to do things without people getting wound up. It's not so stressful and hectic."

Mrs Morgan's 10-year-old son Ben is on the Asperger's spectrum and taking part in Family Values has given him a massive boost in confidence and encouraged him to try new things. "Ben doesn't like touching or feeling anything and he doesn't like games or arty things, so it's

nice for him to do some of those," says Mrs Morgan. "At one of the mega-challenges, he put his hands and feet into some paint while we were all decorating a banner, and that was a massive step for him."

It is now almost two years into Coed Eva's Family Values programme and the scheme has already been taken on board by 28 other schools in Wales. It has also been endorsed by Neil Hawkes, a former head and now an international educational consultant and proponent of values-based education. Plans are afoot to roll the programme out to secondary schools from September – "We've been inundated with requests for that," says Nicola Morgan.

Family Values has helped to transform this primary school into one that is a genuine hub for the community. "It's all to do with the way you live your life," says Mrs Gill. "There's so much going on with parents, but when you focus on one thing each month, it's more likely to be sustainable."

Parents are much more of a regular presence at the school and are often helping out with events or volunteering with the PTA. But, above all, pupils know that their teachers and parents are working from the same page ■