

The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education



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Key findings

- Parental involvement in children's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, and continues to do so into adolescence and adulthood.¹
- The quality and content of fathers' involvement matter more for children's outcomes than the quantity of time fathers spend with their children.²
- Family learning can also provide a range of benefits for parents and children including improvements in reading, writing and numeracy as well as greater parental confidence in helping their child at home.³
- The attitudes and aspirations of parents and of children themselves predict later educational achievement. International evidence suggests that parents with high aspirations are also more involved in their children's education.⁴
- In 2007, around half of parents surveyed said that they felt very involved in their child's school life. Two thirds of parents said that they would like to get more involved in their child's school life (with work commitments being a commonly cited barrier to greater involvement).⁵
- Levels of parental involvement vary among parents, for example, mothers, parents of young children, Black/Black British parents, parents of children with a statement of Special Educational Needs are all more likely than average to be very involved in their child's education.⁵

- This document draws together evidence on the impact of parental involvement on children's education, the stages at which it is known to have an impact on children, and the types of activities that are shown to be influential. Because of the restricted focus of this document on educational outcomes, it does not examine how parental involvement may affect the other four 'Every Child Matters' outcomes for children (i.e. be healthy, stay safe, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being').
- Their involvement in support of the individual child at home.

This document is focused on the second of these, as there is consistent evidence of the educational benefits of involving parents in their child's learning at home.⁶ Because of the complex interaction between a number of factors (and only some of which have been taken into account in the analysis) it is difficult to prove that one causes the other, the research instead demonstrates that a relationship exists between parental involvement and achievement.

Overall, research has consistently shown that parental involvement in children's education does make a positive difference to pupils' achievement. The Children's Plan published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2007 also highlights the importance of partnership between parents and schools to support children in their learning, and how greater support will be provided for parents to involve them in their child's education (in the early years and throughout school).

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What is parental involvement?

Most children have two main educators in their lives – their parents and their teachers. Parents are the prime educators until the child attends an early years setting or starts school and they remain a major influence on their children's learning throughout school and beyond. The school and parents both have crucial roles to play.

There is no universal agreement on what parental involvement is, it can take many forms, from involvement at the school (as a governor, helping in the classroom or during lunch breaks) through to reading to the child at home, teaching songs or nursery rhymes and assisting with homework.

This can be categorised into two broad strands:

- Parents' involvement in the life of the school.
- Women, parents with young children, parents who left full-time education later (i.e. those who left at age 21 or over) those from Black

How many parents get involved and what do they do?

The vast majority (92%) of parents surveyed in 2007 reported that they felt at least 'fairly involved' in their child's school life. Around half felt very involved, which has increased from 2001, when 29% felt very involved.⁵

or Black British backgrounds and parents of a child with a statement of Special Educational Needs are all more likely to feel very involved (compared to men; parents who left education at a younger age; and parents from White or Asian backgrounds respectively).

- Lone parents and non-resident parents are both less likely than average to feel very involved.
- Parents are more likely to see a child's education as mainly or wholly their responsibility (28%) in 2007 compared to previous years, and nearly half (45%) of parents believed that they had equal responsibility with the school.
- Parents also now participate in a wider range of activities with their children. These include: doing school projects together (83%) making things (81%), playing sport (80%) and reading (79%).

Levels of fathers' involvement in their children's education

Studies suggest that fathers' involvement has increased since the 1970s, particularly with children under the age of 5.⁷ There is evidence, however, of great variation in levels of fathers' involvement, so that even though levels have increased on average, a substantial proportion of fathers recorded no daily direct interaction time with their children.⁸ This is likely to reflect, in part, changing family structures.

When surveyed in 2007, mothers are more likely than fathers to say that they felt 'very involved' in their child's education (53% compared to 45%).⁵

Nearly 70% of fathers want to be more involved in their child's education and even higher proportions of non resident parents (81%), who are predominantly male, are also keen for greater involvement.⁵

Research suggests fathers are involved (more often than mothers) in specific types of activities in their children's out of school learning: such as building and repairing, hobbies, IT, maths and physical play.²

A survey of parents in 2007 found that fathers help less often with homework than mothers, however amongst parents working full time there was no gender difference.⁵

Evidence suggests that the quality and content of fathers' involvement matter more for children's outcomes than the quantity of time fathers spend with their children.²

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Why is parental involvement important?

Improvements in cognitive and social development – early years education

Parental involvement with children from an early age has been found to equate with better outcomes (particularly in terms of cognitive development). What parents do is more important than who they are for children's early development – i.e. home learning activities undertaken by parents is more important for children's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income.¹

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project is a large-scale longitudinal study of 3,000 children, which has followed the progress of these children from the age of three. Parents' involvement in home learning activities makes an important difference to children's attainment (and social behaviour) at age three plus through to the age of 10, when the influence of other background factors have been taken into account (such as family socio-economic status, mothers' education, income and ethnicity).⁹

The EPPE research has found that a range of activities are associated with positive outcomes at age 3 and 7 including¹:

- playing with letters and numbers, emphasising the alphabet, reading with the child
- teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing,
- and visiting the library.

This study also found significant differences in the types of home learning activities that parents undertake with boys compared to girls.

Significantly more girls' parents reported activities such as reading, teaching songs and nursery rhymes etc. Differences in this aspect of parenting may account for some of the variation in cognitive and social behavioural outcomes of boys and girls when they enter primary school.¹

The impact of parental involvement for school age children

Evidence indicates that parental involvement continues to have a significant effect on achievement into adolescence and even adulthood.

Research using data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) to explore the effect of parents' involvement on achievement at 16 in English and Maths (and average grades across all

public exams) found that very high parental interest is associated with better exam results compared to children whose parents show no interest.

- Parental involvement has a positive effect on children's achievement even when the influence of background factors such as social class and family size have been taken into account.¹⁰
- Parental behaviour has a bigger effect than school quality on pupils' attainment at Key Stage 2.¹¹ However this research also found that a child's ability on entry to school is the most important factor in predicting Key Stage 2 attainment across subjects (followed by socio-economic background factors including income and parental education).
- Evidence suggests that for boys *parental behaviour and family relationships* has a greater influence on attainment for all Key Stage 2 subjects, whereas for girls *parental education and social and economic background* has a greater influence on attainment in English and Maths at Key Stage 2.¹¹

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The specific impact of fathers' involvement in their children's education

Fathers have a critical role to play in ensuring positive outcomes for their children. There is consistent evidence that fathers' interest and involvement in their children's learning (which was measured in terms of interest in education, outings and reading to the child) is statistically associated with better educational outcomes (controlling for a wide variety of other influencing factors). These outcomes included:

- better exam results, a higher level of educational qualifications, greater progress at school, higher educational expectations
- more positive attitudes (e.g. enjoyment) and better behaviour (e.g. reduced risk of suspension or expulsion) at school.²

These positive associations exist across different family types, including two-parent families, single-parent families and children with non-resident fathers. However, the specific outcomes and strength of effect can vary across family type.

Research indicates that fathers' involvement is important not only when a child is in primary school but also when they are in secondary school and regardless of the child's gender (i.e. for sons as well as daughters).²

Educational attainment into adulthood

- Other studies involving further analysis of the NCDS data have found that fathers' and mothers' involvement in their child's education at age 7 independently predicted educational attainment at age 20 in both sons and daughters¹². Parental involvement in the study was measured in terms of the number outings with the child, parents' interest in education and reading to the child and the study also controlled for a wide range of other influences on educational attainment.

- Further research has examined the effect of parental interest on educational outcomes at age 26 (which again controlled for key factors such as birth weight, social class and mother's educational ability). It found that although mothers' interest predicted educational attainment in both sons and daughters, fathers' interest at age 10 predicted only later educational attainment in daughters. It found that fathers' interest affected sons' educational attainment via its effect on mothers' interest.¹³

Parental involvement in homework and reading

Homework

Nearly three-quarters of parents surveyed in 2007 said that they felt that it was extremely important to help with their child's homework.⁵

Nearly 60% of parents said that they frequently helped their child with their homework (i.e. they did so 'every time' or 'most times'); approximately one third did so occasionally. How often a parent helps with homework is strongly tied to the school year of the child; parents of younger children helped more frequently than those in later school years.⁵

Research shows that pupils tend to hold positive views about homework, seeing it as important in helping them to do well at school¹⁴

Studies suggest that particularly for secondary school pupils there is a positive relationship between time spent on homework and achievement.¹⁴ Evidence for primary schools is inconclusive. This does not necessarily mean however that the more time on homework the higher the achievement; as some international studies suggest that pupils doing a great deal of homework and also those who did very little tended to perform less well at school.¹⁴

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- The frequency with which parents reported reading to the child. This is associated with higher scores for 'pre-reading', 'language' and 'early number' attainment.
- Frequency of alphabet learning. This made a bigger difference on pre-reading attainment than the mothers' highest qualification.
- Frequency of library visits. This showed a smaller but significant positive impact on the above outcomes.

The impact of family learning on children's achievement

The benefit of learning across the family is now well documented. Family learning broadly refers to approaches which engage parents and children jointly in learning. This can include family literacy and numeracy programmes to improve the basic skills of parents and the early literacy of children and may include joint parent/child sessions to support early reading skills.

An evaluation of literacy and numeracy programmes, which examined achievement before and after the courses found:

- Significant improvement in the reading and writing of parents and children following the programme, which was sustained 9 months later.³ Similar improvements were also found for the numeracy schemes.
- Teachers felt that the children who had taken part in family literacy programmes had better classroom behaviour and better support from their families compared to their peers³. They were rated equal to their peers in their motivation and achievement.
- Communications between parents and children were also found to improve markedly, and parents also reported being more confident in helping their child at home and communicating with the teacher at school.

The impact on achievement

There is mixed evidence about whether or not parental involvement in homework affects pupils' achievement at school. Some research suggests that the type (and amount) of parental involvement may be important in increasing pupils' achievement. A study from the United States has explored the effects of different types of parental involvement in homework and found that different forms of support (e.g. support for children's autonomy) are associated with higher test scores, whereas others (e.g. direct involvement) are associated with lower test scores.¹⁴

Beyond simply eliminating distractions, parents can help to create an effective learning environment for their children, as international studies have found that children can have distinct preferences for different learning environments¹⁴ and it may be useful for study environments to be based on children's individual learning styles.¹⁵

The impact of parental involvement in reading on achievement

The EPPE research project has examined the relationship between children's home learning environment and their reading attainment (for 3 to 5 year olds)⁹. Factors that positively influenced attainment included:

Ofsted research¹⁶ also supports the findings above in terms of the positive outcomes for parents and children from successful programmes of family learning. In addition the research reported the following outcomes for parents:

- Benefits in terms of progression for over 50% of participants to Further Education or training or a better job.
- And improved parenting and better relationships with children.

Do parents want to get more involved?

Despite the fact that the vast majority of parents surveyed in 2007 said that they felt at least fairly involved in their child's education,⁵ some parents face particular challenges to becoming involved.

- Two-thirds of parents (66%) agree that they would like to get more involved in their child's school life.
- Parents who felt less involved are also those who wanted to get more involved; particularly non-resident parents and those who left full time education by 16.
- However, many parents who already felt very involved in their child's education also expressed a desire for greater involvement (especially those in non-White ethnic groups and those whose first language was not English).

What are the challenges to becoming more involved?

- Work commitments are the most commonly cited barrier by parents (44%) from getting more involved in their child's school life. Alongside this it should be noted however, that there are also many benefits for families from working.¹⁷
- Other barriers cited by parents included childcare issues/the demands of other children (7%) and lack of time generally (6%).⁵

Difficulties with basic literacy and numeracy skills can also be a barrier to parents being involved in their child's education. Analysis of longitudinal data on adults (using the British Cohort Study and the National Child Development Study) has looked at how parents' literacy and numeracy levels can affect children.¹⁸ This study indicated that children of parents with the poorest grasp of literacy and numeracy are at a substantial disadvantage in relation to their own reading and maths development compared to children who have parents with good literacy/numeracy.

Does parental involvement vary among different groups of parents?

Ethnicity and parental involvement

A survey of parents in 2007 has found variation in levels of parental involvement among different ethnic groups. For example,

- Black parents are more than twice as likely as White parents to say they felt very involved in their child's education.⁵
- Parents from non-White ethnic backgrounds are also more involved in their child's school activities (including homework).
- Parents from non-White backgrounds are also less likely to say that a child's education is the school's responsibility rather than the parent's (17% of Black and Asian parents compared to 27% of White parents said that it was the school's responsibility).

Research on the views of parents from different ethnic communities in England found that Black and Asian parents placed an extremely high importance on the value of education and expressed a great deal of concern about the future of their children.¹⁹ Good education was viewed as very important to combat racial discrimination and disadvantage and to prevent social exclusion.

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Lone parent families and parental involvement

Research has found that lone parents (along with non-resident parents) are less likely than average to feel very involved in their children's education⁵.

Lone parents are also less likely than others to say that they felt very confident in talking to teachers at their child's school (two-thirds of parents said that they felt very confident compared to 60% of lone parents).

Impact of parental attitudes and aspirations

There is evidence that the attitudes and aspirations of parents (and of children themselves) predict children's educational achievement.

However this association between parental aspirations and a child's attainment is complex and affected by interrelationships.

- International studies indicate that parental education influences expectations, in that having higher parental education is significantly related to having higher expectations of children's achievement.²⁰ However, it is also likely that parents with higher education have higher attaining children for whom they have higher expectations.

- Parents' perceptions of their child's skills and ability also influence their aspirations for them.⁴
- U.S. studies have found that parents with high aspirations are more involved in their children's education.⁴

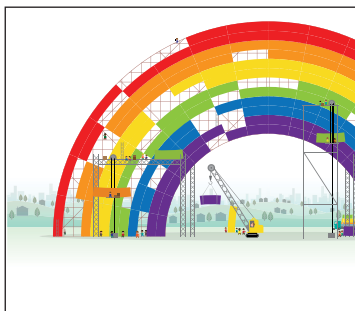
A literature review by Gutman and Akerman⁴ found that:

- Most parents have high aspirations for their young children; however these aspirations are likely to change as children grow older because of economic constraints, children's abilities and the availability of opportunities.
- Although aspirations significantly predict attainment, regardless of socio-economic background, they may be stronger predictors of achievement for young people from more advantaged (socio-economic) backgrounds.
- There is evidence that some groups (in particular females, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and some ethnic minorities) may be more likely than others to experience an 'aspiration-achievement gap'; which is the difference between their aspirations and educational achievement.
- Whilst high parental and pupil aspirations may lessen the effects of low socio-economic background, the effects vary amongst different ethnic groups. For example Black Caribbean young people have poor progress (even when a broad number of socio-economic variables were included in the analysis) despite high educational aspirations of parents and pupils. This suggests the need to ensure that practical and attitudinal obstacles are also addressed alongside measures which support aspirations.

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