

I THE CONTEXT: WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

Benefits of Family Involvement in Education

Families are considered the primary context of children's development. Whether children are "ready" for school and experience success throughout their school career depends, in large part, on their physical well-being, social development, cognitive skills and knowledge and how they approach learning (NCES, 2000). Family characteristics and home experiences also contribute to this readiness and later success. If families don't provide the necessary support and resources that their children need to increase their chances of succeeding in school, their children are placed at increased risk for school failure (Macoby, 1992).

It is well documented that family involvement is a "win/win" for both students and schools. Thirty years of research shows that students benefit by achieving higher grades, better attendance and homework completion, more positive attitudes toward school, higher graduation rates and greater enrollment in college.

Enhanced performance can be measured by such things as a student getting mostly As, his or her enjoyment of school and his or her involvement in extracurricular activities. These last two measures are probably as important as the first. After all, children who enjoy school are more likely to perform better academically and to remain in school (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). And, participation in extracurricular activities reduces the risk of poor behavior, dropping out of school, becoming a teen parent and using drugs (Zill, Nord & Loomis, 1995).

Schools benefit by improved teacher morale, higher ratings of teachers by parents, more support from families and better reputations in the community (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

What's Special About Fathers' Involvement?

Research shows that students perform better academically, have fewer discipline problems, and become more responsible adults when their parents are actively involved in their learning. But, over the years, "parent involvement" often has meant "mothers' involvement." In schools, pre-schools and Head Start

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"My parents, like, want me to have the best education I can have. So, if my parents weren't involved, I might not get as good a teacher or something like that. And, it might affect my grades or my learning." (1999 National Teleconference)

"I don't think parents need to be in the building or like active in the classrooms or PTA, but I think they need to know what their child is learning. I think they need to know the homework situation, and how they can help their kid if their kid needs help. I think children should know that they can come to their parents." (1999 National Teleconference)

programs, and within the family itself, it has been assumed often that mothers have the primary responsibility for encouraging the children's learning and development. These assumptions miss the importance of fathers' involvement. In addition, the adverse effects of a father's absence on the development of his children are well documented. Nevertheless, over half of the children in the United States will spend part of their childhood in a single-parent home (Cherlin, 1992).

Following are some areas in which fathers' involvement has significant effects on children.

Modeling adult male behavior. Fathers demonstrate to their children that male adults can take responsibility, help to establish appropriate conduct, and provide a daily example of how to deal with life, how to dress, how to regulate closeness and distance, and the importance of achievement and productivity. If they have an active religious or spiritual life, fathers, like mothers, can serve as models in that area as well (Hoffman, 1971).

Making choices. Children glean from their fathers a range of choices about everything from clothing to food to devotion to a great cause. This promotes positive moral values, conformity to rules and the development of conscience (Hoffman, 1971).

Problem solving abilities. Research shows that even very young children who have experienced high father involvement show an increase in curiosity and in problem solving capacity. Fathers' involvement seems to encourage children's exploration of the world around them and confidence in their ability to solve problems (Pruett, 2000).

Providing financial and emotional support. Economic support is one significant part of a father's influence on his children. Another is the concrete forms of emotional support that he gives to the children's mother. That support enhances the overall quality of the mother-child relationship, for example when dads ease moms' workloads by getting involved with the children's homework (Abramovitch in Lamb, 1997).

Highly involved fathers also contribute to increased mental dexterity in children, increased empathy, less stereotyped sex-role beliefs and greater self-control. And when fathers are more

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From an 18-year-old: "They (parents) were extremely involved because they had such a stake in it. My dad would go to PTA meetings. They have always wanted to get involved, always making sure that I was getting everything out of the school that I could. I'm extremely glad now because I think it did a lot to shape me." (Galinsky, 1999)

From a 12-year-old: "I miss him. He's gone for short times. He calls from where he is. I'd rather have him at home during that time, but I know he has to do it because it's part of his job." (Galinsky, 1999)

actively involved, children are more likely to have solid marriages later in life. (Abramovitch in Lamb, 1997).

Enhancing student performance. In families where both the father and the mother are highly involved with their children's school, the children enjoy several advantages.

- Children's enjoyment of school is enhanced.
- In two-parent families where fathers are highly involved in children's schools, students are more likely to get top grades and enjoy school than in families where fathers have low involvement, even after taking into account a variety of other child and family conditions that may influence learning. In these circumstances, the chances that children will get mostly As are higher when the father is highly involved than when the mother is highly involved (NCES, 1997).
- In general, children have better educational outcomes as long as either the mother or the father is highly involved. Children do best when both parents are highly involved.
- When parents are highly involved in their children's schools, the parents are more likely to visit museums and libraries, participate in cultural activities with their children, and have high educational expectations for them. (NCES, 1997).

While children do best when both parents are highly involved, as long as either the mother or father is highly involved in their school's activities, children have better educational outcomes in general than those whose parents are not so involved. For example, in single-parent families headed by fathers, with higher father involvement:

- Thirty-two percent of children in grades K-12 got mostly As compared to 17 percent of those with low-involvement fathers;
- Eleven percent of children in grades K-12 were suspended or expelled compared to 34 percent of

What Our Children Tell Us

"I can't spend much time with him because he's working. Sometimes I go with him to work on the weekends. But I just wish that he wouldn't work so much." (Galinsky, 1999)

From a 14-year-old:
"If a child has something to say, listen to them. They might teach you something." (Galinsky, 1999)

those with low-involvement fathers;

- Thirteen percent of children in grades K-12 repeated a grade compared to 18 percent of those with low-involvement fathers; and
- Forty-four percent of children enjoyed school compared to 30 percent of those with low-involvement fathers (NCES, 1997).
- Children do better academically when their fathers are involved in their schools, whether or not their fathers live with them, or whether or not their mothers are involved. When non-custodial fathers are highly involved with their children's learning, the children are more likely to get As at all grade levels (NCES, 1997).

Fathers' Involvement in Education

Kind and scope of family involvement. High involvement by the father or mother can make a positive difference for children's learning across grades K-12.

High involvement at the early childhood level refers to the frequency with which parents interact with their young children, such as how often they read, tell stories, and sing and play with their children (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). These experiences contribute to children's language and literacy development and transmit information and knowledge about people, places and things.

For purposes of this report, high involvement in school-related activities means that a parent has done three or more of these activities during a school year: attended a general school meeting, attended a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference, attended a general school or class event and served as a volunteer at school. Parents are said to have low involvement in their children's schools if they have done none or only one of the four activities (NCES, 1997).

In 1999, the National Center for Fathering conducted a national telephone survey researching involvement among resident and non-resident fathers. Given what we know about the effects of high involvement, the results were staggering. Over 40 percent

What Our Children Tell Us

From a 17-year-old about a nonresident father: "I get very angry at him. There're some things that I think he should do, but he doesn't. My school is really family oriented; we have Mother-Daughter this, Father-Daughter that. I would invite him and he'd be like, 'No, I don't want to go,' and it's like well, I mean, I think we should. It's like we don't have quality time really, cause I mean we don't spend time together like that." (Galinsky, 1999)

of fathers had never read to their school-aged children.

The National Household Education Survey of 1996 (discussed in NCES, 1997) collected data on the academic achievement of students and their family's involvement in their schools during the first quarter of 1996. Phone interviews were conducted with parents and guardians of over 20,700 children from three years old to twelfth-graders. Here's what the survey found about the overall kind and scope of family involvement.

- The most common involvement activity in which parents participate is a general school meeting, such as a back-to-school night.
- Most parents do participate in at least some of the activities in their children's schools. But parents in two-parent homes tend to divide the task of involvement between them. To save time, one or the other will attend, but usually not both.
- Parents who are highly involved in their children's schools are more likely to also be involved at home. Similarly, families who are involved in their children's schools tend to share other activities with their children as well.
- Highly involved parents are more likely than all others to believe that their children will get further education after high school and will graduate from a four-year college.
- Highly involved parents offer their children greater connections to the larger community. These parents are more likely to belong to an organization such as a community group, church, synagogue, union or professional organization. They are also more likely to participate in an ongoing service activity and to attend religious services on a weekly basis.
- Parents are more likely to be highly involved if their children attend private, as opposed to public, schools. But private schools often make parental involvement a requirement; thus, part of the higher involvement may be a matter of school policy.

What Parents Tell Us

A father of a nine-year-old boy: "Time is something, once it's gone, it's gone forever. So, you can look back and think, 'Well, gee, I wish I would have spent more time with my kids when they were younger. I wish I would've spent more time with them when they were in high school,' whatever. But once time is gone, that's it." (Galinsky, 1999)

In the mornings, "We got to ride in the car together – we had a good time in the car. We could say a few nice words to each other and start the day in the right way." (Galinsky, 1999)

- High involvement in schools tends to decrease as school size increases.

Other sources add to the research on the kind and scope of family involvement.

- Parents tend to decrease their involvement as their children move up the educational ladder. This decrease may be due to parents' idea that involvement in schools is not as important as children grow up. Additionally, there have been fewer opportunities for parental involvement as children become older (Zill and Nord, 1994).
- Parents are more involved when they are confident that they can be of assistance to the child, when they believe that the child is capable of doing well in school and when they have high educational aspirations for the child (Abramovitch in Lamb, 1997).

Two-parent families: kind and scope of fathers' involvement. The involvement of one parent in a two-parent home motivates the other parent to be involved. However, dads are less likely than moms to attend a parent-teacher conference or volunteer at school. Stepparents are less likely to be involved than natural or adoptive parents.

Parent level of education appears to be a more important influence on parent involvement than is family income. For example, nearly 60 percent of first-time kindergartners were read to every day by a family member if one or more parents had a bachelor's degree or higher while less than 40 percent of first-time kindergartners were read to every day by a family member if that member had less than a high school education (NCES, 2000).

As the labor force participation rate of mothers with young children has increased, so has the percentage of children receiving child care from someone other than their parents before entering first grade (West et al., 1993) or during their kindergarten and primary school years (Brimhall et al., 1999). Those kindergarten children whose mothers have less than a high school education are more likely to receive before- and/or after-school care from a relative than from a non-relative or center-based provider (NCES, 2000).

Full-time maternal employment (mothers who work 35 or more hours per week) reduces maternal involvement at all grade levels. However, at all grade levels, fathers with full-time working wives have more involvement than fathers without full-time working wives (NCES, 1997).

Parental involvement in schools is closely linked to parental involvement at home. Higher father involvement is particularly related to the number of activities the family participates in with the children, the frequency with which a parent helps with homework and whether a parent regularly participates in a community service activity.

In general, fathers' involvement in their children's schools decreases as children grow older. The decline may also be attributed to the school offering fewer opportunities for parental involvement as children grow older. However, the pattern of decline differs between fathers in two-parent families and those in single-father families.

- In two-parent families, the proportion of children with highly involved fathers drops from 30 percent to 25 percent between elementary (grades K-5) and middle school (grades 6-8), but then drops only slightly, to 23 percent, in high school (grades 9-12).
- Among children living in single-father families, there is no decrease in the proportion that have highly involved fathers between elementary and middle schools (53 percent at both grade levels), but a large decrease between middle and high school (to 27 percent) (NCES, 1997).

Single-parent families: fathers' involvement. Single fathers are more likely to be involved with students in grades 6-8 than with those in high school. For older children in grades 6 - 12, discussion of future educational plans increases their dads' involvement. Children of any age getting mostly As is not related to the involvement of single dads as it is among fathers in two-parent families (NCES, 1997).

Involvement of nonresident fathers. Involvement of nonresident dads is substantially lower than that of dads in two-parent homes. Nonresident father contact with children *and* involvement in their schools within the past year are associated with the same three factors:

- Fathers paying child support;
- Custodial mothers being more educated; and
- Custodial homes not experiencing financial difficulties.

Nonresident fathers tend to become less involved with their children's schooling as the children grow up. These nonresident dads are more likely to be involved in their children's education if the mothers have not remarried (NCES, 1997).

Barriers to Fathers' Involvement

Strategies that strengthen family involvement in education must take into account barriers that confront families, schools and communities. According to a 1992 National Center for Fathering Gallup Poll, 96 percent of those surveyed agreed that fathers need to be more involved in their children's education. Furthermore, 54 percent agreed that fathers spend less time with their children than their fathers did with them, and only 42

percent agree that most fathers know what is going on in their children's lives. Why are fathers not more involved in their children's education?

Getting fathers into the school building. Some schools, preschools and childcare programs don't have family-friendly environments and are not organized to work with families. Also, when parents are invited into the schools or centers, fathers are less likely, on average, to respond to these invitations for involvement. Why? Part of the reason is that parents often assume that such invitations are for mothers only. Though incorrect, that assumption is understandable: in our society, the word *parent* in the school context and others has often been interpreted to mean *mother*. Moreover, some parents believe that schooling should be left to the education experts, and the family's role is one of caring and nurturing outside of school.

Institutional practices. Fathers ranked institutional practices and barriers imposed by the workplace as the most important reasons for their low levels of involvement. Paternity leave is the most frequently discussed means of enhancing paternal involvement, even though some research indicates that flextime schedules would be of greater value in encouraging fathers' involvement (Abramovitch in Lamb, 1997).

Language and cultural barriers. Some fathers can't read or are functionally illiterate. Or, they can't communicate in English. They are embarrassed to come to school and interact with educators because they lack, or may believe they lack, these necessary communication skills.

Disconnected community-based organizations. Community-based organizations that attract families with children, such as churches and childcare centers, are often disconnected from schools. They operate their own programs within their neighborhood centers. They are missed opportunities to link families with schools. Recently, there have been expanded attempts to link school and community through these organizations. The Department's Partnership for Family Involvement in Education represents one such effort. The results look promising.

Education of parents. Parents' education is a more significant factor than family income in whether or not they will be involved in their children's education. The less education mom and dad have, the less likely they are to be involved. Not surprisingly, if they are highly involved with their children at home, they are more likely to be involved at school.

Lack of time. Today's workers are increasingly asked to do more with less, and thus work longer hours. Dual-career families may face scheduling conflicts and have less control over work hours, further aggravating the balancing act of work and family.

Not knowing what to do. Parents generally, and fathers specifically, may not know how to assist their children with their education. Parents can be intimidated by new,

unfamiliar course content, higher expectations for learning and computer technology. Their response may be to do nothing.

Unsafe neighborhoods. Unsafe conditions in neighborhoods can also isolate parents from schools. Safety concerns restrict families from traveling to schools, particularly after dark.

Spousal/adult support. The involvement of one parent in a two-parent home tends to spur the involvement of the other. If dad is not involved, mom may not get involved, and vice versa. Fathers may need the support of their wives to overcome the disconnectedness that plagues some fathers today, and mothers may need help adjusting to fathers' desire to be involved.

Separation/divorce processes. Divorce severely impacts a father's ability to be involved with his children. In 82 percent of marital breakups today, fathers do not have custody of their children (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1996). This in turn contributes to academic, social, mental and physical difficulties for children (Pruett, 2000).