6: PARENTAL AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This paper reviews the research evidence relevant to understanding the relationship between parental involvement and children's performance in school. Indicators of parental involvement with school (e.g., attendance at school events, parent/teacher conferences, PTO) have mixed associations with children's school performance. In contrast, measures of parental involvement at home (e.g., talking to children about school-related matters, high educational expectations, warm and consistent discipline) show consistent associations with children's school success. But even this evidence – based on correlations – may not represent causal relationships, and so some critics maintain that what parents do has little effect on children's school performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Programs designed to promote parent/teacher interaction should be continued, but with greater emphasis on initiatives designed to improve the parent/child relationship.
- Programs should be promoted that increase the amount of time low-income children are exposed to school-based activities, whether through more after-school programs, summer activities, or year-round schooling.

6: PARENTAL AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

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By the age of eighteen, children have typically spent only 13% of their waking life at school,[1] and there are credible reasons for believing that parents have a role in shaping whether the remaining 87% is spent in a way that promotes school success. The current research evidence provides some guidance for understanding the kinds of parental involvement that most likely improves children's school performance, although limitations of this work merit attention.

PARENTAL AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT RESEARCH

Research on parental involvement in their children's education covers two broad areas: the effects of parental interaction and involvement in the school, and the impact of parental involvement in the home. Research has examined both the norms of parental-school interaction at various levels of society, and the efficacy of special efforts to enhance parental involvement with school activities.

PARENTS AT SCHOOL

Parents and Teachers

There are several reasons for believing that good parent-teacher relationships are conducive to children's school performance. Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, and Fendrich[2] explain: "When parents communicate constructively with teachers and participate in school activities, they gain a clearer understanding of what is expected of their children at school and they may learn from teachers how to work at home to enhance their children's education" [3] When parents attend parent/teacher conferences, for example, it creates continuity between the two dominant spheres of influence in the child's life, home and school,[4] and likely signals to children the

parents' value for education. In addition, some have argued that children learn more when they receive consistent messages from home and school.[5] Epstein[6] writes that the "main reason...for better communications and exchanges among schools, families, and community groups is to assist students at all grade levels to succeed in school and in life." [7]

But what is the evidence that children's school performance is enhanced by a strong parent-teacher relationship? Stevenson and Baker report that children performed better in school (as measured by teacher ratings of how well the child performed in school and whether the child performed up to his or her ability) when teachers rated the parents as actively involved in school activities such as PTO and parent-teacher conferences in their sample of 179 children drawn from the Time Use Longitudinal Panel Study.[8] Similarly, Grolnick and Slowiaczek studied 300 11-14 year-olds and found a strong association between teachers' reports of parental involvement (measured as frequency of attendance at parent-teacher conferences, open school night, and school activities and events, such as the PTO) and teacher reported grades, controlling for parents' education.[9]

But several studies report the opposite pattern: an inverse relationship between parent/school contact and children's school success.[10] Desimone analyzed the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), a nationally representative sample of nearly 25,000 eighth graders collected in 1988, and found negative associations between parents' contact with the school regarding academic matters and students' math and reading test scores and grades.[11] Rigsby, Stull and Morse-Kelly suggest that one reason for this puzzling pattern is that parents may become involved with adolescents' schooling when the youths experience either behavioral problems or poor grades.[12] Unfortunately, cross-sectional data do not allow us to assess that possibility.

Some study designs avoid the limitations of correlational research by comparing children involved in an intervention program with those who did not experience the intervention. Moses et al. report the results of an intervention in which parents were involved in children's schooling in several ways: as project leaders, through informational meetings, through participation in workshops, and by acting as voluntary classroom helpers. In this study, students demonstrated a marked increase in math performance compared to the achievement of students from previous years lacking this parental involvement intervention.[13] Although it is impossible to know if the intervention program was the only major difference in the children's experiences across the different school years, the results of this study are consistent with the claim that nurturing parental involvement in the classroom can improve school performance.

School-Level Parental Involvement

Children may experience some benefits from their parents' involvement at school, but do they also fare better merely by attending a school where many other parents are highly involved? One argument is that children benefit from school-level parental involvement because it promotes information sharing and greater normative control over children's behavior. Coleman described how "social closure," i.e., environments in which parents know each other, facilitates children's identification with school.[14] Podolny and Baron[15] explain that "a cohesive network conveys a clear normative order within which the individual can optimize performance, whereas a diverse, disconnected network exposes the individual to conflicting preferences and allegiances within which it is much harder to optimize." [16] As an illustration, if most parents strictly enforced homework rules then it becomes more difficult for any single child to resist because they are exposed to an environment where doing homework is normative. In this way, children benefit

from their own parents' school involvement but also by attending a school where many parents are involved.[17]

While this argument has face validity, to date it receives only modest empirical support. Carbonaro found mixed support for Coleman's claims. He reported that social closure was related to better performance on mathematics test scores and a decrease in the probability of dropping out, but had no effect on reading test scores or grades.[18] Importantly, other researchers analyzing the same data concluded that social closure was associated with *lower* math test scores,[19] and so the debate regarding the benefits of social closure in school persists.[20]

Other researchers have asked how much variation in students' scores on achievement tests can be attributed to school-level differences in parental involvement. The answer, apparently, is very little. Sui-Chu and Willms analyzed NELS data and concluded that while schools did differ in the level of involvement associated with parental volunteers or attendance at parent-teacher conferences, school-level parental involvement plays only a very small role in explaining students' math and reading test scores.[21] They concluded that while schools vary in the degree to which parents are involved in school activities, relatively few schools have a strong influence in shaping the learning climate at home, the dimension of parental involvement most closely related to students' school success.[22]

Intervention studies also show little evidence that school-level parental involvement has any significant impact on students' school performance. For example, a recent intervention termed CoZi (Co for James Comer and Zi for Edward Zigler) involved:

1) parent and teacher participation in school-based decision making that is grounded in child development principles;
2) parent outreach and education beginning at the birth of the child;

3) child care for preschoolers and before- and after-school care for kindergarten through sixth graders; and
4) parent involvement programs.

In initial evaluations comparing one CoZi and one non-CoZi elementary school, the CoZi school had better school climate and parental involvement than the comparable non-CoZi school, but parent-child interactions and children's level of achievement were not improved.[23] Of course, it is possible that the children experienced no improvements in school performance because the program was only in effect one year.

Taken as a whole, the current research evidence suggests that parent involvement in children's schools via attending parent-teacher conferences, contacting school officials, attending school events, and developing a close-knit community where many parents know each other, probably has modest positive effects on children's school performance. If parents are serious about helping their children do well in school, improving their relationship with teachers and involvement in school activities are worthy goals. The bulk of research evidence, however, suggests that how parents interact with their children at home matters more.

PARENTS AT HOME

There are many reasons for believing that what parents do at home plays an important role in shaping children's school-related skills. One piece of evidence comes from the recently collected nationally representative *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort of 1998-99.* Eighteen percent of children entering kindergarten in the U.S. in the fall of 1998 did not know that print reads left to right, where to go when a line of print ends, or where the story ends in a book.[24] At the other end of the spectrum, a small percentage of children beginning kindergarten could already read words in context. These large differences in beginning skills

likely represent varying levels of exposure to print in the home. More evidence that what happens at home is important comes from researchers making seasonal comparisons–comparing students' cognitive gains during the summer and winter. Three independent longitudinal studies reach the same conclusion: disadvantaged children lose ground primarily during the summer, when school is not in session and parents' influence is primary.[25] But if home practices matter so much, what exactly do parents do that promotes children's school success?

Parenting Style

To the extent that school-related skills, both cognitive and social, are shaped by parenting approaches, parents play an important role in preparing children to meet teachers' demands. One characteristic of parents that is consistently related to children's school performance is the expectation parents have for their child's educational future. Children with parents who hope and expect them to do well are more likely to do well in school than their counterparts with parents who do not have high educational expectations for their children.[26]

But other work suggests that the best parenting approach combines high expectations with parental responsiveness or warmth. One idea popular among developmental psychologists is that an *authoritative* parenting style, characterized by a balance between parents' expectations and responsiveness, promotes children's self-esteem, mastery, and ultimately school success.[27] The argument is that children benefit from authoritative parenting because parents establish and consistently enforce rules and standards for their children's behavior using nonpunitive methods of discipline. Authoritative parents are warm and supportive and encourage communication with their children while validating the child's individual point of view. In contrast, children's development is said to be less consistent when exposed to *permissive* parenting (low

expectations and high responsiveness) or *authoritarian* parents (high expectations and low responsiveness).

Some empirical evidence is consistent with this view. Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, and Fraleigh studied 7,836 high school students in the San Francisco Bay area and found associations between the parents' style of interaction (reported by the student) and students' grades that persisted despite statistical controls for parents' education, race, family structure, and the child's sex. Students describing their parents as employing an authoritative style performed best in school, while students with authoritarian and, to a lesser extent, permissive parents were more likely to have lower school grades, net of controls.[28] Similarly, in their study of adolescents in nine different high schools, Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, and Darling found that students with authoritative parents took greater responsibility for their school outcomes.[29]

Other studies, although not employing Baumrind's "authoritative/authoritarian" nomenclature, supplement our understanding of parental practices that are related to children's school success. The Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (CNLSY) and Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP) employ the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) scale to assess the quality of the child's home environment. The scale is based on interviewers' observations and questions of the mother. It includes measures of learning experiences outside of the home (e.g., trips to museums, visits to friends, trips to the grocery store), literary experiences within the home (e.g., child has more than ten books, mother reads to the child, family members read newspaper), cognitively stimulating activities within the home (e.g., materials that improve learning of skills such as recognition of letters, numbers, colors, shapes, and sizes), punishment (whether child was spanked during the home visit;

maternal disciplinary style), maternal warmth (mother kissed, caressed, or hugged the child during the visit; mother praised the child's accomplishments during the visit), and the physical environment (whether the home is reasonably clean and uncluttered; whether the child's play environment is safe). A one standard deviation increase on the HOME scale was associated with a 9-point gain on the PPVT-R vocabulary test.[30] Phillips et al. conclude: "For parents who want their children to do well on tests (which means almost all parents), middle-class parenting practices seem to work."[31]

Similarly, in once-monthly observations of 40 families over a two and a half year period, Hart and Risely[32] found several dimensions of parenting style that were related to the child's subsequent performance on IQ tests. They conclude that three primary dimensions of parenting are what matter:

1) The absolute amount of parenting per hour (e.g., how often the parent is in the child's presence, the percentage of child activities in which the parent took a turn, the number of words the parent speaks to the child);
2) parents' social interaction with the children (e.g., the percentage of child's initiations the parent responds to); and
3) the quality of speech to the child (e.g., how often did the parent repeat child utterances, the percentage of parent utterances that were questions, and the absence of prohibitions such as "stop," "quit," or "don't").

The third factor, quality of speech to the child was the strongest predictor of the child's later IQ. They conclude that "[t]he major differences associated with differences in IQ were the extensive amount of time, attention, and talking that higher SES parents invest in their children and their active interest in what their children have to say."[33]

Clark's 1983 study also is consistent with Baumrind's emphasis on warm and responsive parenting. Clark studied 10 African-American children, half of whom were successful academically and half of whom were not. Clark reported that parents of high-achieving students had a distinct style of interacting with their children. They created emotionally supportive home environments and provided reassurance when the children encountered failure.[34]

Other studies also show evidence of parental involvement in the child's school planning as important. Using the NELS, Sui-Chu and Willms developed four dimensions of parental involvement: 1) home discussion, 2) home supervision, 3) school communication, and 4) school participation. They report that "of the four types of involvement, home discussion was the most strongly related to academic achievement."[35] The pattern they found was replicated by others.[36] This association may represent greater parental interest in the child's progress, greater involvement in negotiating course selection, guidance in how to handle school problems, or a number of other ways parents help their children with schooling.

Children whose parents provide structured, adult-supervised activities at home tend to do better on cognitive tests and earn better grades.[37] Clark found that parents of successful students actively helped them organize their daily and weekly schedules and monitored this schedule closely to ensure that it was followed.[38] Similarly, Taylor reports that family routines (e.g., "My family has certain routines that help our household run smoothly") are associated with success in school.[39] Children may benefit from structure because it promotes the development of school-related habits that teachers tend to reward (e.g., consistent attendance, attentiveness, consistently turning in homework, not disrupting class).

Parents' linguistic styles are also related to children's school success. Children do better in school when their parents verbalize instructions frequently and specifically. [40] Parents' use of

verbal variety and detailed instruction are features of language associated with high academic achievement among children. Further, the parents of high-achieving children tend to be closely attuned to the cognitive level of their children and to respond more to individual cues their children give than to preconceived expectations or status rules for children.[41]

Reading to Children

Not surprisingly, several research strains suggest that children whose parents read to them 20 minutes or more a day during the pre-school years have substantially higher pre-reading skills when they enter kindergarten.[42] When analyzing the Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (CNLSY), Phillips et al. note that five- and six-year-olds' vocabulary scores are about 4 points higher (one-quarter of a standard deviation) when their mothers read to them daily as opposed to not at all, net background controls.[43] Furthermore, a British study suggests that parental reading may be more effective than reading with someone else. The authors report that children benefited more from being read to aloud two to four times a week from books sent home from school than did children receiving additional assistance at school from a tutor.[44]

Educational Opportunities

Some research suggests that children's school performance is better when the home has a variety of educational objects, such as books, newspapers, a computer, magazines, and a place to study.[45] While children would obviously not benefit from books in the home if never opened, the presence of books or a computer provide the child with the opportunity to develop school-related skills. In addition, there is an association between the amount of money parents save for children's educational future and school performance.[46] It is not clear whether this money directly influences children (by providing the message that they are expected to go to college) or if it is merely correlated with other parental characteristics that matter.

Homework

Finn suggests that helping with homework is a concrete way that parents demonstrate the commitment they have to education.[47] Surprisingly, however, there is little research support for this claim. Many studies based on the NELS sample of eighth graders show an inverse association between parents' help with homework (or rules about homework) and youths' performance in school,[48] although most suspect that this association is a result of parents deciding to help a struggling child. In addition, parents' effectiveness may depend on their level of education. Balli, Wedman, and Demo found that students whose parents held a college degree benefited more from parental involvement with homework than did students whose parents lacked a college degree.[49]

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu posited that students receive academic rewards not just for course knowledge, but also for signaling affiliation with elite groups (i.e., "cultural capital") through their speech, style, mode of dress, and other habits.[50] Bourdieu viewed cultural capital as arbitrary – he argued that the cultural practices of the elite are not inherently "better" than those of the disadvantaged – but cultural capital associated with elite culture tends to be rewarded in the classroom. From this perspective, some of the skills or habits children need to develop for school success are not necessarily "good" but are simply the ones rewarded by teachers.[51] Consistent with these claims, DiMaggio reported that U.S. high school students received higher grades, net of socioeconomic status, when they reported interests (e.g., interest in being a composer) and involvement (e.g., attending literature readings) in art, music, and literature.[52] Other researchers have also noted that children tend to do better in school when they have been exposed to events or activities outside of school such as art and history museums, or music and dance lessons.[53]

What are some of these cultural skills for which children are rewarded? Swidler describes a tool kit of cultural skills, habits, and styles as largely ingrained behaviors.[54] These might be as simple as understanding appropriate kinds of responses to teachers' questions about a book[55] or understanding that print reads left to right, where to go when a line of print ends, or where the story ends, three skills that nearly one in five children entering kindergarten in America lack.[56] This cultural tool kit may also contain non-cognitive skills that are important for negotiating the student role. For example, students who can demonstrate the appropriate level of attentiveness, persistence at tasks, eagerness to learn, and organizational skills are more likely to earn good grades.[57]

Low-Income Parents

Many of the parental practices described above are highly correlated with socioeconomic status, and so it is likely that one of the reasons children from disadvantaged backgrounds do less well in school than their more advantaged counterparts is because their parents' interaction style less successfully prepares them for school. Indeed, some scholars report that the typically positive effects of socioeconomic status on children's school performance are mediated entirely by parenting practices.[58] It is difficult to discern precisely how related parenting styles and socioeconomic status are, but it is clear that there is substantial overlap.

In his classic 1969 book, *Class and Conformity*, Melvin Kohn offers one reason for this overlap. He argued that parents' style of interaction with their children is influenced in important ways by the parents' occupations. Parents who work in jobs with little autonomy (e.g., data entry) and are rewarded for adherence to external standards (e.g., being on time, being neat, obedience to authority), tend to parent in ways that prepare their children for success in these same kinds of jobs. Kohn found that working-class parents put more emphasis on obedience than

did middle-class parents. In contrast, parents in occupations that allow for more self-determined activities and decision-making tend to promote their children's skills for assuming these kinds of middle-class occupations. The middle-class parent, therefore, uses a less punitive style of discipline and puts greater emphasis on developing children's internal controls. From Kohn's perspective, both low- and high-socioeconomic parents want what is best for their children; they are simply teaching their children the skills they deem necessary for success in the world. Through the working-class parent's interaction style, however, he or she unwittingly increases the likelihood that the child will remain in the same social class position.[59]

Socioeconomic position is also related to how parents interact with teachers and school officials. Lareau observed parent/teacher relationships in a working-class and a middle-class community and reported that teachers in both communities made active efforts to involve parents, but that low-income parents were less involved. Working-class parents were less likely to attend parent-teacher conferences, for example, in part because the costs of attending – in terms of obtaining transportation, securing child care, and rearranging work schedules – were typically greater for working- than for middle-class parents. In addition, working-class parents were more likely than middle-class parents to espouse a view that it is the school's job to educate their children.[60] Lareau writes: "Working-class culture ... promotes independence between the spheres of family life and schooling."[61] In contrast, middle-class parents were more likely to view their child's education as partly their own responsibility, along with the school's. Working-class parents were less involved with teachers for other reasons too. They were less comfortable interacting with teachers, in part, because they reported feeling unqualified to discuss academic problems. When they did have contact with teachers, working-class parents often discussed non-academic issues such as bus schedules or playground activities.

Others note how language differences across class end up shaping success in school. Bernstein describes how parents of low socioeconomic status tend to use a "restricted" language code in which language is embedded in context, reflects the status of individuals, and minimizes the need to make one's meaning explicit. In contrast, higher socioeconomic parents use an "elaborate" code that is less context-based and more individualistic so that language is used to make meaning more explicit.[62] To illustrate this difference Bernstein offers two vignettes of a mother and a child riding a bus. In the lower socioeconomic pair, the mother's mode of control relies on commands with little explanation (e.g., "Hold on tight") and reflects the hierarchical view of the adult-child relationship ("I told you to hold on tight, didn't I?"). In the middle socioeconomic group, the interactions are less hierarchical, and the mother provides a learning opportunity by using language to explore the situation ("If you don't hold on tight, you will be thrown forward and you will fall," "If the bus stops suddenly, you'll jerk forward on to the seat in front.") Bernstein notes that an important educational consequence of these two different approaches to language is that the relatively context-independent style used by the middle-class parent matches that expected by school teachers.[63]

In addition, low-income parents experience greater financial stress and health-related problems than other parents, and both of these may impede their ability to develop consistent routines. Children perform better in school when their learning is not compromised by hunger, distracting physical ailments, lack of adequate sleep, unattended visual limitations, or other health related problems. Ear infections during the early years (before age four) pose a special problem because they can alter the functioning of the middle ear and thus affect the child's hearing and, consequently, language development. A report from the National Institute on Early Childhood suggests that treating middle ear infections is crucial to children's language

development.[64] Kellaghan et al. note that iodine deficiency during pregnancy, zinc deficiency, and iron deficiency have long-lasting consequences for children's development.[65] There is also greater drug and alcohol abuse among the poor, factors that work against consistent routines. While some low-income parents may benefit from instruction on developing home routines, for those low-income parents who suffer from drug and alcohol abuse or experience stress related to financial problems, health problems, or both, it is unlikely that they will make substantial progress in developing home-based routines while these underlying problems persist.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The current evidence suggests that there may be some profit in improving parent/teacher relations, but that a more effective way to improve children's school performance involves improving parent/child relations. This is disconcerting news for policymakers, because parent/child relations are much more difficult to affect via policy than parent/teacher relations. And for low-income families, part of parents' interaction style – linguistic style, for instance – is likely rooted in class position and may not be fundamentally altered unless class position changes. If parents are unlikely to change what they do at home unless their class position is improved, one policy approach is to increase the amount of time that children are with teachers via after school programs or year-round schooling. Given what has been already noted from seasonal comparison research – that the gap in cognitive skills between advantaged and disadvantaged children emerges primarily during the summer – low-income children would likely benefit the most from more exposure to schooling.

The record for changing parents' home behaviors in ways that affect children's school performance is not encouraging. White, Taylor and Moss carefully reviewed the results of 172 studies ranging from those training parents to improve children's developmental skills (e.g.,

motor, language) to those where parents were classroom aides.[66] Surprisingly, they find little evidence that parental involvement matters. They conclude that "there is no convincing evidence that the ways in which parents have been involved in previous early intervention research studies result in more effective outcomes."[67]

However, one recent study shows success. Children participating in the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program enrolled in half-day preschool at ages three to four years and were exposed to rigorous reading lessons in small classes while their parents were involved in activities with other parents (e.g., educational workshops, reading groups, and craft projects), volunteered in the classroom, attended school events and field trips, and were encouraged to complete high school. Further, the program included health and nutrition services, health screening, speech therapy, and nursing and meal services. Results suggest that children in the program were more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to be arrested 15 years later than similarly matched children.[68] Because involvement in the program was not a result of parent initiative – parents were actively recruited for the program – it is unlikely that the advantages for participants merely represent the selectivity of more involved parents.[69]

WHAT HAVE CRITICS SAID?

The vast majority of research on parenting practices is correlational, and so an important concern is that the observed associations between parenting practices and students' school performance represent mere correlations, not causal relationships. This position has received considerable attention lately from behavioral geneticists who assert that the role of parental behaviors has been overstated in the social sciences and that genetic influences have been understated.[70] With respect to the impact parents have on children through shaping the home environment, Scarr writes:

> It is clear that there are family differences, but it is also clear that most of those differences are not environmental. Among families in the mainstream of Western Europe and North American societies, differences in family environments seem to have little effect on intellectual and personality differences among their children, unless they are seriously deprived of opportunities and support... [g]ood enough, ordinary parents probably have the same effects on their children's development as culturally defined super-parents.[71]

For purposes of understanding how parental involvement influences children's school performance, this debate is especially important because, if the behavioral geneticists' position is correct, most parents cannot affect their children's school success much.

An example of the problem of determining causality with correlational studies can be illustrated with the frequently found negative relationship between how often parents help with homework and children's school performance.[72] The idea that more help is associated with poorer performance strikes one as counterintuitive.[73] But this association probably represents parents' response to children's need for help. The kinds of children needing help are different (probably poorer students) than the kinds of children who easily complete their homework on their own. In a typical correlational study, researchers try to address this possibility by statistically equalizing the two groups on characteristics such as income, education, family structure, race, urban/suburban/rural location, and other factors they suspect might be different between the kinds of parents who supervise children's homework versus those who do not. They would also statistically control for the child's previous performance in school.

These attempts to isolate the unique effect of "parental involvement in homework" are limited, however, because we usually cannot measure or even conceive of all of the ways the two groups of parents and their children may be different. As a result, despite statistical controls we probably fail to obtain unbiased estimates of the true effect of parental help with homework. Of course it is possible that children's school efforts really are hampered rather than helped by their

parents, but few researchers espouse this view. A more likely explanation is that the statistical controls used to equalize the two groups are inadequate. But if this kind of problem affects our ability to estimate accurately the effects of parental involvement with homework, it likely affects our estimates of other parental behaviors too, casting doubt on nearly all of the parental involvement literature.[74]

Another example of the behavioral geneticists' position can be understood by considering the associations between "good" parenting practices and children's school success. Behavioral geneticists note that parents influence children in two ways, by providing their home environment but also by passing on genes. If parents who create good environments are also parents with good genes, associations between good parenting behaviors and students' school success may have little to do with parenting actions and may simply represent the genetic advantages typical of parents who also happen to use good parenting practices. This line of thinking posits that the correlation between "good" parenting (authoritative) and children's school success may be a function of parents with genetic advantages (high intelligence, easy disposition) having children with similar advantages and also parenting in the culturally prescribed way. Among middle-class Americans of European descent this means an authoritative approach. Because other racial/ethnic groups favor other parenting styles, genetically advantaged parents in other groups might not use authoritative parenting. Asian Americans, for example, more often use authoritarian parenting, yet Asian-American children often do well in school.[75] Correlations from most parenting studies could be reinterpreted as the effects of good genes rather than good parenting.

It is difficult to discern between environmental and genetic explanations with correlational data, so one approach is to look at whether adopted children are more like their

adopted parents (who provide their environment) or their biological parents (who provide their genes). In terms of scores on intelligence tests, it appears that adopted children are more like their biological parents, even if they were adopted at birth [76] Another analytically powerful comparison is to look at children who are similar genetically but who have experienced different environments: identical twins reared apart. Of course, identical twins are rare themselves and so finding identical twins raised apart is nearly impossible. Researchers at the University of Minnesota have collected data on more than 100 pairs, however. Analyses of these data show surprising results – the twins are more alike each other than we would expect, even when unaware of each other's existence for most of their lives.[77] While the position that children's outcomes are more readily understood via genetics rather than environment may strike many as unlikely, it is not easily dismissed based on the current empirical evidence.

The implications of this position – that parental involvement matters little – are clear for policy: Only programs designed to raise children out of the very worst environmental conditions would be effective.

Several important issues regarding heritability studies are still debated. For example, critics point out that it is not clear how much contact occurred between some of the identical twins raised apart in heritability studies. Identical twins in these studies vary in many ways (e.g., the age at which they were separated and the difference in the kinds of home environments they were raised); ideally all would have been separated at birth and raised in randomly different environments, but, of course, it would not be ethical to set up such an experiment prospectively. Another issue has to do with the attempt to neatly separate environmental and genetic effects. Critics claim that genetic and environmental effects interact and so typical heritability studies underestimate environmental contributions.[78] For example, a temperamentally difficult child may

be difficult for genetic reasons, but this child also evokes harsh parenting. Perhaps identical twins reared apart are similar to each other because they end up evoking similar environments (they look alike), and only modestly so because of shared genes. If this interpretation of heritability studies proves true, then how parents interact with their children matters.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research available to date on the subject of parental involvement in education yields conclusions about what we know as well as what we don't know.

It is unlikely that increasing parents' participation at PTA meetings and in helping with homework *alone* will have a substantial impact on children's school performance. Programs that successfully raise children's school performance via parental involvement do so by meeting the broad needs of parents. For example, the success of the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program is probably a function of the wide range of services provided to parents, including educational workshops, reading groups, and craft projects, health and nutrition services, health screening, speech therapy, and nursing and meal services.

There is little reason to believe that the kinds of policy initiatives employed in the past – even the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program – will dramatically affect the gap in performance among students from low- and high-income families. After-school and year-round programs will probably benefit low-income children the most.

It is not clear that children's performance in school is solely or perhaps even primarily a function of parenting style. While children's school success is associated with parenting approaches, this association is culturally specific (e.g., authoritative parenting is used among the parents of successful white students but authoritarian parenting is used among the parents of

successful Asian-American students in the U.S.) and may represent, in part, the genetic similarity between parent and child.

These conclusions support the following policy recommendations to enhance parental involvement:

- Programs designed to promote parent/teacher interaction should be continued, but with greater emphasis on initiatives designed to improve the parent/child relationship. Programs designed to meet the broad needs of parents (e.g., improving parents' reading skills, reducing financial stress, meeting health and nutritional needs) are likely to be the most successful.
- Programs should be promoted that increase the amount of time low-income children are exposed to school-based activities, whether through more after-school programs, summer activities, or year-round schooling.

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It is hard to argue that there is something we can call "good parenting" that applies universally. Dornbusch et al. found that the correlation between authoritative and permissive parenting styles and achievement was insignificant for all Asian students. Desimone and Steinberg et. al report similar patterns. In addition, Schneider and Lee report that Asian students are less influenced by the family-school link than are other students.

29 Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, and Darling.

The authors measured parenting style via adolescents' responses to questions about their parents' acceptance/involvement (e.g., "When [my mother or father] wants me to do something, [he or she] explains why"; " I can count on [him or her] to help out if I have some kind of problem") and strictness/supervision (e.g., My parents know exactly where I am most afternoons after school"; "In a typical week, what is the latest you can stay out on school nights?"). Twelve percent of the adolescents were categorized as living in authoritarian homes where the adolescents rated their parents in the upper third for both acceptance/involvement and strictness/supervision.

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about high school program, (12) parents report knowing parents of child's friends. The most consistent positive influence on students' math and reading test scores and grades was students' reports of discussing school matters with parents (talks to mother about planning high school program, discussed program at school with parents, discusses school activities with parents, discusses thing studied in class with parents). Parents knowing the parents of their child's friends also consistently predicted math and reading test scores and grades, although this benefit did not generalize to low-income families. In addition, Desimone (1999) reports that parental involvement measures account for twice as much variance in student grades than in student test scores.

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43 Phillips et al.

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Stevenson and Baker's indicator of parental involvement was based on teachers' responses to the questions, "To what extend did his/her parents get involved in the activities of the school such as PTO and parent-teacher conferences?" Their indicator of socioeconomic status was the mother's education.

59 M. L. Kohn, *Class and Conformity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969).

S. Bowles and H. Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

Bowles and Gintis argue that schools in working-class neighborhoods also promote obedience and vocational skills that will likely ensure the reproduction of class position. Middle-class schools, they argue, allow students greater responsibility and put less emphasis on obedience to external standards–practices that prepare them for middle-class jobs.

60 A. Lareau, "Social Class and Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital," *Sociology of Education* 56 (April 1987): 73-85.

61 Ibid., p. 82.

62 B. Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

63 Ibid.

64 *Reconsidering Children's Early Learning and Development: Toward Shared Beliefs and Vocabulary*, eds. S. L. Kagan, E. Moore, and S. Bredecamp, (Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel, 1995).

65 T. Kellaghan et al., *The Home Environment and School Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

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67 Ibid., 91.

68 A. J. Reynolds et al., "Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, no. 18 (2001): 2339-2346.

69 For a more detailed description of the intervention, see: A.J. Reynolds, *Success In Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

70 J. R. Harris, *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do* (The Free Press: New York, 1998).

D. C. Rowe, *The Limits of Family Influence: Genes, Experience, and Behavior* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994).

S. Scarr, "How People Make Their Own Environments: Implications for Parents and Policy Makers," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 2, no. 2 (1996): 204-228.

R. Plomin, M. J. Owen, and P. McGuffin, "The Genetic Basis of Complex Human Behaviors," *Science* 264 (17 June 1994): 1733-1739.

71 Scarr, 220-221.

72 Milne et al.

Madigan.

73 Some studies suggest that parents help their children more with homework when they are young and so it is possible that the studies based on the NELS eighth graders simply reflect that most parents are helping little at that point unless their child is struggling. It would be a mistake to conclude that parental involvement with homework, especially at young ages, is detrimental.

74 Arguably, research that looks at how changes in parental involvement are associated with changes in children's school performance, are less vulnerable to this criticism. For example, Izzo et al. estimated children's

standardized test scores at Time 2 while controlling for Time 1 measures, and still found that parental involvement variables predicted test scores. There are important limitations to this study, however. See: Izzo et al.

75 L. Steinberg, S. M. Dornbusch, and B. B. Brown, "Ethnic Differences in Adolescent Achievement: An Ecological Perspective," *American Psychologist* 47 (1992): 723-729.

76 R. Plomin, "The Role of Inheritance in Behavior, Science," 248 (1990): 183-188.

77 T. J. Bouchard, Jr., " Genes, Environment, and Personality," *Science* 264 (17 June 1994): 1700-1701.

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78 W. A. Collins et al., "Contemporary Research on Parenting: The Case for Nature and Nurture," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 2 (2000): 218-232.