

Don't Help Your Kids With Their Homework

And other insights from a ground-breaking study of how parents impact children's academic achievement

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One of the central tenets of raising kids in America is that parents should be actively involved in their children's education: meeting with teachers, volunteering at school, helping with homework, and doing a hundred other things that few working parents have time for. These obligations are so baked into American values that few parents stop to ask whether they're worth the effort.

Until this January, few researchers did, either. In the largest-ever study of how parental involvement affects academic achievement, Keith Robinson, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and Angel L. Harris, a sociology professor at Duke, mostly found that it doesn't. The researchers combed through nearly three decades' worth of longitudinal surveys of American parents and tracked 63 different measures of parental participation in kids' academic lives, from helping them with homework, to talking with them about college plans, to volunteering at their schools. In an attempt to show whether the kids of more-involved parents improved over time, the researchers indexed these measures to children's academic performance, including test scores in reading and math.

What they found surprised them. Most measurable forms of parental involvement seem to yield few academic dividends for kids, or even to backfire—regardless of a parent's race, class, or level of education.

Do you review your daughter's homework every night? Robinson and Harris's data, published in *The Broken Compass: Parental Involvement With Children's Education*, show that this won't help her score higher on standardized tests. Once kids enter middle school, parental help with homework can actually

bring test scores down, an effect Robinson says could be caused by the fact that many parents may have forgotten, or never truly understood, the material their children learn in school.

Similarly, students whose parents frequently meet with teachers and principals don't seem to improve faster than academically comparable peers whose parents are less present at school. Other essentially useless parenting interventions: observing a kid's class; helping a teenager choose high-school courses; and, especially, disciplinary measures such as punishing kids for getting bad grades or instituting strict rules about when and how homework gets done. This kind of meddling could leave children more anxious than enthusiastic about school, Robinson speculates. "Ask them 'Do you want to see me volunteering more? Going to school social functions? Is it helpful if I help you with homework?'" he told me. "We think about informing parents and schools what they need to do, but too often we leave the child out of the conversation."

One of the reasons parental involvement in schools has become dogma is that the government actively incentivizes it. Since the late 1960s, the federal government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on programs that seek to engage parents—especially low-income parents—with their children's schools. In 2001, No Child Left Behind required schools to establish parent committees and communicate with parents in their native languages. The theory was that more active and invested mothers and fathers could help close the test-score gap between middle-class and poor students. Yet until the new study, nobody had used the available data to test the assumption that close relationships between parents and schools improve student achievement.

While Robinson and Harris largely disproved that assumption, they did find a handful of habits that make a difference, such as reading aloud to young kids (fewer than half of whom are read to daily) and talking with teenagers about college plans. But these interventions don't take place at school or in the presence of teachers, where policy makers exert the most influence—they take place at home.

What's more, although conventional wisdom holds that poor children do badly in school because their parents don't care about education, the opposite is true. Across race, class, and education level, the vast majority of American parents report that they speak with their kids about the importance of good grades and hope that they will attend college. Asian American kids may perform inordinately well on tests, for example, but their parents are not much more involved at school than Hispanic parents are—not surprising, given that both groups experience language barriers. So why are some parents more effective at helping their children translate these shared values into achievement?

Robinson and Harris posit that greater financial and educational resources allow some parents to embed their children in neighborhoods and social settings in which they meet many college-educated adults with interesting careers. Upper-middle-class kids aren't just *told* a good education will help them succeed in life. They are surrounded by family and friends who work as doctors, lawyers, and engineers and who reminisce about their college years around the dinner table. Asian parents are an interesting exception; even when they are poor and unable to provide these types of social settings, they seem to be able to communicate the value and appeal of education in a similarly effective manner.

As part of his research, Robinson conducted informal focus groups with his undergraduate statistics students at the University of Texas, asking them about how their parents contributed to their

achievements. He found that most had few or no memories of their parents pushing or prodding them or getting involved at school in formal ways. Instead, students described mothers and fathers who set high expectations and then stepped back. “These kids made it!” Robinson told me. “You’d expect they’d have the type of parental involvement we’re promoting at the national level. But they hardly had any of that. It really blew me away.”

Robinson and Harris’s findings add to what we know from previous research by the sociologist Annette Lareau, who observed conversations in homes between parents and kids during the 1990s. Lareau found that in poor and working-class households, children were urged to stay quiet and show deference to adult authority figures such as teachers. In middle-class households, kids learned to ask critical questions and to advocate for themselves—behaviors that served them well in the classroom.

Robinson and Harris chose not to address a few potentially powerful types of parental involvement, from hiring tutors or therapists for kids who are struggling, to opening college savings accounts. And there’s the fact that, regardless of socioeconomic status, some parents go to great lengths to seek out effective schools for their children, while others accept the status quo at the school around the corner.

Although Robinson and Harris didn’t look at school choice, they did find that one of the few ways parents can improve their kids’ academic performance—by as much as eight points on a reading or math test—is by getting them placed in the classroom of a teacher with a good reputation. This is one example for which race did seem to matter: white parents are at least twice as likely as black and Latino parents to request a specific teacher. Given that the best teachers have been shown to raise students’ lifetime earnings and to decrease the likelihood of teen pregnancy, this is no small intervention.

All in all, these findings should relieve anxious parents struggling to make time to volunteer at the PTA bake sale. But valuing parental involvement via test scores alone misses one of the ways in which parents most impact schools. Pesky parents are often effective, especially in public schools, at securing better textbooks, new playgrounds, and all the “extras” that make an educational community come to life, like art, music, theater, and after-school clubs. This kind of parental engagement may not directly affect test scores, but it can make school a more positive place for all kids, regardless of what their parents do or don’t do at home. Getting involved in your children’s schools is not just a way to give them a leg up—it could also be good citizenship.