

# Doing What Matters Most

## How parents can help their children succeed at school

Parents do more to help their children succeed in school by chatting about what they learned today or asking questions about a TV show they watched together than by “drill and skill” homework sessions, endless nagging, or racing off to a meeting at the school.

But many Ontario students say their parents aren't doing that.

**Research on effective parent involvement** There is thirty years of research showing that parents' involvement in their children's education has a significant impact on children's academic and developmental goals (Epstein, 2001; Nye, Turner & Schwartz, 2006). But how parents are involved matters — and the involvement that makes the biggest difference to students' chances for success in school isn't what many would expect.

Researchers divide parent involvement into two basic categories:

- Home-based activities and attitudes, such as having high expectations, talking together about school, building work habits and a positive approach to learning, or reading together.
- School-based activities, such as communicating with teachers, attending meetings about your child, volunteering in the classroom or school council work

A review of the research shows that it is the home-based activities and attitudes that are more closely linked to students' academic achievement, but even then, it is the *kind* of home-based activities that matters most.

## HOME-BASED ACTIVITIES

More important than limiting TV time, or even monitoring homework, there are four things that lead the pack when it comes to making a difference:

- Parents having high (but reasonable) expectations of their children
- Parents talking with their children, particularly about school
- Parents helping their children develop positive attitudes towards learning and strong work habits
- Parents reading to or with their children

### 1. High expectations

A series of systematic review articles found high parental expectations (followed by reading with children and talking about school) had the greatest impact on student achievement (Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). When parents consistently communicate their belief in their children's potential and communicate that they expect them to be able to succeed academically, students do better.

### 2. Talking about school

A major study of 25,000 U.S. schoolchildren showed “home discussion”—parents talking with children about school activities and programs—had a greater impact on academic achievement than a wide range of other parent actions. Simply talking with kids about school was shown to have more of an effect than contact between parents and the school and parental volunteering. Talking also had more of an impact than various forms of parental “supervision,” such as monitoring kids' homework, parents being at home after school, or limiting TV time or the time students were allowed to go out during the week (Ho & Willms, 1996).

The same study also provides evidence that confronts stereotypes that some racial groups, or working class families, place less emphasis on schooling or think that education is the school's responsibility (see also Henderson & Mapp, 2002 for similar findings). In fact, levels of home discussion are relatively consistent across ethnic-groups, socio-economic status, and family structure, and between schools.

This finding underscores the importance of education policy that focuses on supporting home-based discussion. Policy that focuses on home discussion is more likely to be useful to all parents, rather than only those parents who choose to be involved at school. A focus on school-based involvement may reach only a select

minority of parents because, as Ho and Willms found, there are substantial class, racial, and family structure differences in levels of participation on school councils and parent volunteering at school.

In fact, focusing on parents' participation with their children at home may begin to help address the current 'achievement gap' between high-, and low-performing students, which is often related to socio-economic status and race.

The experts agree that schools could be more effective in their communications with parents about the importance of their participation with their children's education at home. Ho and Willms conclude that, "relatively few schools have strong influences on the learning climate in the home. We expect that big gains in achievement could be realized through programs that give parents concrete information about parenting styles, teaching methods, and school curricula" (1996, p.138).

But home-based involvement doesn't necessarily involve hands-on help with homework. Students' homework in older grades is related to achievement. But a major research synthesis on parent involvement in homework found, in fact, its effect is "negligible to nonexistent, except among the youngest students" (Patall, Cooper & Civey, 2008, p.1095).

### **3. Attitudes and work habits**

As children grow older, many of the factors that directly affect achievement are out of parents' control. Parents can't teach their children everything they need to know, but they can play a critical role in students' chances for success by helping to shape their attitudes, their sense of personal competence and their work habits including persistence, seeking help, and planning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch & Darling).

This means that rather than trying to directly "teach" their children, the more important work of parents can be found in helping kids handle distractions, negotiating crises of confidence, praise for effort and persistence or constructively handling conflict while being positive about school as a whole. Bit by bit, this effort builds a solid foundation for success.

### **4. Reading together**

Reading is one of the main foundations of all education. And parents' can make a major difference by reading and talking about books and stories with their children.

While the letter-sound correspondence that children learn at school is vital, the

motivation, comprehension and strong oral language skills children develop through conversation and reading together with their parents creates the crucial foundations for successful literacy in primary years and beyond (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

Reading and talking in a child's home language builds these skills as effectively as reading and talking in the language of the school (August & Hakuta, 1997).

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## **THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS, AND WHAT PARENTS AND SCHOOLS *DO***

Every year, the province's Educational Quality and Accountability office surveys all the children in grade 3 and 6 (252,218 students in 2009-10), all their teachers (15,804), and all their principals (3466) to provide background information on the education system and individual students (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2010, pp. 6-16, 22-31).

According to the children, their parents don't regularly talk to them about school or read with them.

### **Talking about school**

- Less than half of students in grade 3 (46%) talk to a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day” about their school activities.
- 26% of grade 3 students say they never, or only once or twice a month, talk about school activities with a parent or guardian.
- 38% of grade 6 students say they talk to a parent or guardian almost every day

about school activities.

- 29% of grade 6 students report that they never, or only once or twice a month, talk about school activities with their parents or guardians. **Reading together**
- Only 21% of children in grade 3 report that they read together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day”.
- 55% of grade 3 students report either that they never read with a parent or guardian, or that they do so only once or twice a month.
- By grade 6, only 4% report that they read together every day or almost every day (but 38% of grade 6 students report that they read stories or novels by themselves, and 47% report they read email, text or instant messages).

**Teachers and principals report communications gaps** Almost all teachers surveyed communicate with most parents at least two or three times a year about learning goals, assessment strategies and how to support learning at home.

But there are persistently lower levels of communication in grade 6 than grade 3 – most notably, 59% of grade 3 teachers “share information about what to do at home to support learning with the majority of parents / guardians” at least once a month, and only 36% of grade 6 teachers shared this information. On average, 57% of Grade 3 and 6 teachers shared information about individual children’s progress at least once a month.

Most elementary school principals report that parents are supportive of their children’s teachers (89%), and that the school has collaborative relationships with parents to help meet learning goals (72%).

But the devil is in the details.

While 86% say they keep all parents informed about school activities, only 32% say they feel successful helping all parents understand student learning goals and outcomes.

The results suggest a continued emphasis on school- based parent involvement— getting people into the school and participating in activities—which research shows is less closely linked to achievement. This emphasis is particularly problematic in light of the evidence that school-based parent involvement

(volunteering, going to council meetings) is most relevant to white, upper-middle class two parent families (Ho & Willms, see above). Ontario research confirms school councils are not generally representative of the parent community (Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Corter, Harris & Pelletier).

School councils offer important opportunities for community-building, decision-making, communication and building social networks and a stronger constituency for public education (see e.g. Epstein, 1995). But an over-emphasis on school-based involvement may also increase stress on very busy parents—which isn't good for anyone (see e.g. Lerner et al., 2002; Corter & Pelletier, 2005).

Careful policy work is required to make help home-based parent participation in education visible and make it “count” for teachers and principals (e.g., Flessa, 2008).

## **WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?**

The good news is that school practices can make a difference, but it's less about *programs* and more about communication, collaboration and building relationships (Mattingly et al., 2002).

There is a strong body of research finding that there are some core elements that create effective working relationships with parents. And those relationships do have a positive impact on students.

### **Collaborative relationships and trust**

Collaborative relationships with teachers and others at the school are linked to improved attendance, better student engagement, more positive relationships (Harris & Goodall, 2007).

Achievement improves, when communication *builds trust* between teachers, students and parents (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Trust and communication make it easier for kids to move between home and school with a positive attitude about both, which supports resilience and achievement (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). But for those collaborative relationships to be established effectively and be relevant for *all* parents, schools should take the lead.

### **Invitations**

One of the factors that affect parents' decisions to participate more in their

children’s schooling is within control of the school. Parents need to be invited—both in general and specific ways. Those invitations can come directly from the teachers or the school, or indirectly through the students. A general invitation comes by creating an inviting school climate, and through teachers’ welcoming, facilitative attitude. Specific invitations include communications from teachers that suggest parents get involved in particular activities with their children.

When teachers suggest a specific activity for parents to do with their children at home, [see box] levels of parent involvement increase (see e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Anderson & Minke, 2007; Epstein, 1991; Reed, Joens, Walker & Hoover- Dempsey, 2000). Invitations from teachers are particularly important for parents who are less confident in their ability to help their children in the school system, and for older children where parents may not realize they have a role to play.

### **Two-way communication**

Direct communication, seeking information from parents about what they want and need for their child’s success, helps build strong school-family connections. A shared understanding about what the child will learn this year and how their learning will be assessed helps parents support their children and helps maintain communication all year (Patel, Corter & Pelletier, 2008).

Effective outreach makes a difference in school-wide achievement. Schools that actively tackle challenges such as communicating with parents who cannot make it into the school, or who speak different languages, have better overall achievement (Sheldon, 2003).

It means educators—particularly teachers—on the front line, need to look for a menu of different ways of communicating with and hearing from parents (Mapp & Hong, 2010). Regular email updates or a blog may work tremendously well for many working parents (at least 77% of Ontario households have internet at home); but phone calls or face-to-face contact with an interpreter may also be a better way reach others.

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**Mapp & Hong, 2010**

## CONCLUSION

The research on effective parent involvement emphasizes the importance of parents' attitudes, and their activities in the home to support children's success in school.

Parents influence their children's success through high expectations, talking to their children about school, and generally working to create a positive attitude about learning and strong work habits. These things, along with enjoyable activities such as reading together, and even watching television together and talking about what they've seen, have more of an impact on students' chances for success than the more "school-like" activities that parents often feel they should undertake, such as helping with homework.

Ontario research suggests that this message is not well-known to parents: large numbers of children report they don't talk to their parents about school, nor do they read with their parents. Teachers' and principals' self-reports about communication with parents suggest that home-school communication with most parents is fairly infrequent, and often focused on activities at the school rather than on communicating what parents could be doing at home.

While there is no quick fix or program that will ensure effective parent involvement that boosts the success of all children, more could be done to communicate with parents how they can support their children's education. Policy that includes outreach to all parents about what they do at home may reach beyond those parents who are involved at the school. This form of outreach may help to at least partially address the current achievement gap between high-and low-performing students.

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