

Why Families Matter to Literacy

A brief research summary

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Learning is complex; it begins at birth and continues throughout life. Parents are the first teachers and role models for their children, and therefore have a strong influence on their learning. Yet, studies continue to show that many **parents are not aware of the importance they play in their child's education** and have a limited understanding of their role in their children's learning (DCSF, 2007).

Significance of family involvement

The evidence about the benefits of parents being involved in their children's education in general, and their children's literacy activities in particular, is unequivocal. For example, **research shows that parental involvement in their children's learning positively affects the child's performance at school**, both in primary (Jeynes, 2005) and secondary school (Jeynes, 2007). The impact is the same regardless of ethnic background, family income, maternal level of education, or child's gender (Deaher et al., 2006; Jeynes, 2005). There are also numerous studies that have shown that **children who grow up in a stimulating home environment** – one which has a great emphasis on learning opportunities – **do better academically**, regardless of socio-economic background (e.g. van Steensel, 2006). According to Desforges and Abouchar (2003), "parental involvement has a significant effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors (such as social class, maternal education and poverty) have been taken out of the equation between children's aptitudes and their achievement".

In addition to higher academic achievement and greater cognitive competence, **parental involvement leads to greater problem-solving skills**, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance, fewer behavioural problems at school, and greater social and emotional development (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons et al., 2001).

The home environment

Research has also repeatedly shown that the most accurate predictor of a pupil's achievement is not parental income or social status but **the extent to which parents are able to create a home environment that encourages learning, communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for achievement and future careers**, and where parents become involved in their children's education at the school and in the community (Sanders and Epstein, 1998). Literacy is one of the areas where parents have the simple facilities (a book or other reading materials) to become involved and to make a difference. Indeed, of all school subjects, reading has been found to be most sensitive to parental influences (Senechal and LeFevre, 2002). In

turn, success in reading is a gateway to success in other academic areas as well (Jordan, Snow and Porsche, 2000).

Simple interactions, such as being read to, and exposure to books, magazines, newspapers and environmental print, impact children's progress in learning to read (e.g. Whitehurst, 1998), and children who come from richer home literacy environments show higher levels of reading knowledge and skills at the start of kindergarten (Nord, Lennon, Liu and Chandler, 2000) and throughout primary school (Wade and Moore, 2000). There is also ample **evidence that parents who promote reading as a valuable and worthwhile activity have children who are motivated to read for pleasure**. Involvement with reading activities at home has significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich and Welsh, 2004), but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991).

Family involvement at school

The earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004). Although parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, its importance to children's educational and literacy outcomes continues into the teenage and even adult years (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). For example, Feinstein and Symons (1999) found that parental interest in their child's education was the single greatest predictor of achievement at age 16. Parent's involvement outside of home, such as participation in extracurricular activities also impacts on their children's reading, general knowledge, and mathematics knowledge and skills (Reaney, Denton and West, 2002).

In a recent study (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins and Weiss, 2006) for the **Harvard Family Research Project**, it was found that family involvement in school matters most for children whose mothers have less education. More specifically, the authors found that **increases in family involvement in the school** predicted increases in literacy achievement for low income families and that family involvement in school matters most for children at greatest risk. More specifically, Dearing and colleagues found that if families who were initially uninvolved in the school became more involved, their children's literacy improved. Importantly, their results indicated that even one or two additional involvement activities per year were associated with meaningful improvements for children.

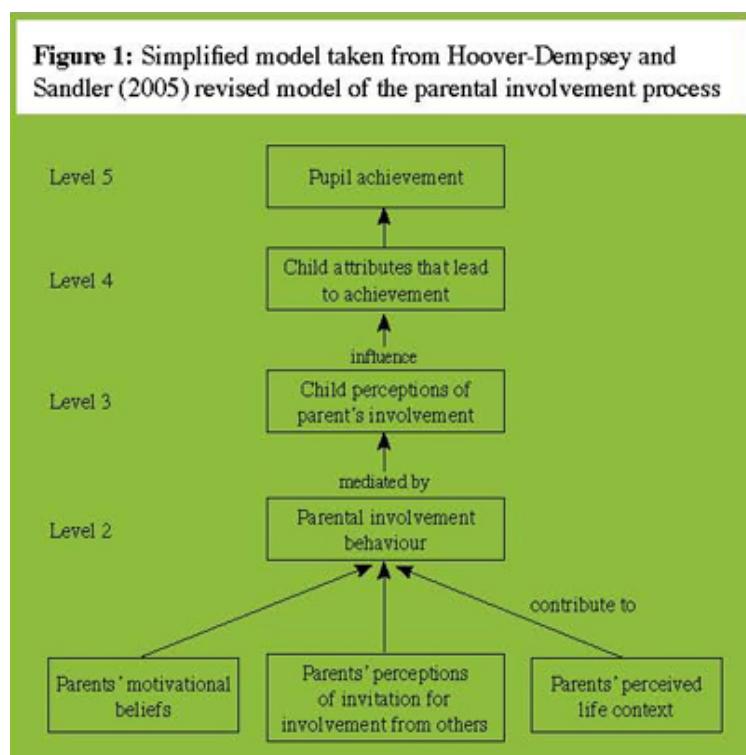
Motivations for parents

The recent parental involvement literature has been synthesized by Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues who used it to build, and later revise, a model of parental involvement that takes into account three central questions: why do parents become involved in children's education?; what do they do when they're involved (i.e., what mechanisms of influence do they engage when they are involved)?; and how does their involvement, once engaged, influence student outcomes?

Although this model does not talk specifically about literacy outcomes, its general parental involvement processes are equally applicable to the present context. What is interesting about this model is that it takes into account both parent characteristics and circumstances as well as child characteristics. According to this model (see Figure 1), **parents are at the most fundamental level motivated to become involved by their sense of self-efficacy** in helping their child succeed, their perceptions of being invited to become involved by the school, their child and teachers, by their knowledge and skills, and by the perceived input to be made in terms of time and energy. These perceptions and beliefs then contribute to involvement

behaviours at home and at school, which can take the form of encouragement, modelling, reinforcement and instruction. The degree to which these parental behaviours influence the child's educational achievements depends on the child's attributes, such as his/her academic self-efficacy, motivation and strategy use, which in turn depend on the child's perception of the parental involvement behaviours.

Figure 1: Simplified model taken from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) revised model of the parental involvement process



Types of parental involvement

Since the research evidence leaves no doubt about the benefits of parental involvement, researchers have begun to explore **what types of involvement** have the greatest benefit on children (Henderson and Mapp, 2002), and it should come as no surprise that **parent and community involvement** that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

In a meta-analysis of over 50 studies, Jeynes (2005) found that types of involvement that required **a large investment of time, such as communicating and/or reading with the child**, as well parenting style and parental expectations, **had a greater impact on educational achievement** than some other forms of involvement, such as parental attendance and participation at school. Indeed, reading and communication with the child emerge as important facets of parental involvement in numerous studies.

However, involving parents in their children's literacy activities not only benefits their children. There are also numerous benefits that have been reported for the parents themselves, including greater skill acquisition, greater confidence and self-esteem, a better parent-child relationship, and increased engagement with learning.

Supporting parents is high on the Government's agenda. The National Year of Reading was announced, in March 2007, in Every Parent Matters, a document that sets out the vital role parents play in improving their child's life chances. Importantly, parents can help show children that education is more than just the delivery of a curriculum (Cullingford and Morrison, 1999).

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