





## Should parents be involved in their children's schooling?

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### ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, there has been debate about whether parents should be involved in their children's schooling. Although some have argued that parent involvement benefits children, others have argued that it does not and even has costs. Drawing on the large body of research relevant to this controversy, we make the case that, in general, parent involvement in children's schooling facilitates children's motivation, engagement, and learning, particularly when such involvement is autonomy supportive and affectively positive. However, parent involvement can have costs for children when it is controlling and affectively negative, which may be most common in the homework context because of the pressure associated with it. We offer a set of recommendations for educators to consider in taking the pressure out of the parent involvement equation, thereby facilitating parents' optimal support of children's motivation, engagement, and learning.

It is a widely held belief across educators, administrators, and parents that parent involvement<sup>1</sup> in the academic context facilitates children's academic adjustment (i.e., motivation, engagement, and achievement). In fact, fostering parent involvement in this context has been an explicit goal in federal legislation including the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the more recent Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Consequently, teachers involve parents in a variety of activities (e.g., volunteering in the classroom and assisting with homework), and many parents jump in when they have the opportunity.

Thus, in 2014, it was surprising to many when Robinson and Harris published their book, *The Broken Compass*, in which they argued that parent involvement in children's schooling is not strongly associated with children's achievement. The authors examined 63 indicators of parent involvement in various longitudinal studies, including the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and the Child Development Supplement (CDS) panel study. They reported that parent involvement was not associated with children's achievement in over half of the 1556 effects they examined, and was more often negatively than positively associated with children's achievement. Their conclusions gave rise to several popular articles, including one in 2014 in the *Atlantic* titled, "Don't Help your Kids with Homework."

Given these conflicting conclusions about parent involvement in children's schooling, a careful look at the evidence for its effectiveness and key recommendations based on them are warranted. We argue in this article that the evidence indicates that parent involvement is indeed an important and necessary ingredient in children's academic adjustment, however, its effects vary by the type of involvement, the quality of the involvement, and why parents become involved. First, we review evidence that the type of involvement matters, with some types of involvement more likely to confer benefits than others. Second, we make the case that the quality of involvement is important, in particular, autonomy-supportive and affectively positive involvement are more likely to have positive effects, whereas controlling and affectively negative involvement are more likely to have negative effects. We then turn to what contributes to the quality of parent involvement, focusing on both why parents become involved and the role of pressure, which we suggest should be considered by educators in their efforts to leverage parents' positive contributions in the learning process.

### **The type of parent involvement matters**

Although the notion of parent involvement in the academic context traditionally conjures a parent helping in the classroom or going to open school night, parent involvement is a broad and multifaceted concept. Definitions of parent involvement in children's schooling, such as parents' commitment of resources (e.g., time, energy, and supplies) to their children's academic lives (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) and parents' interactions with schools and children to promote academic success (Hill et al., 2004, p. 1491), reflect this broad view. Within these definitions, researchers have distinguished between parent involvement at school (e.g., talking with teachers and volunteering at school) and home (e.g., helping with homework and course selection; e.g., Epstein & Sanders, 2002). Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) offered a three-pronged framework, highlighting (1) school involvement, including attending open houses and volunteering at school; (2) personal involvement, including communicating interest in and asking about school; and (3) cognitive-intellectual involvement, which includes engaging in cognitively stimulating activities outside the home.

There are various perspectives as to why parent involvement is helpful (for a review, see Pomerantz et al., 2012). From a skills perspective, often evoked in the context of children's literacy and math activities, parent involvement helps to develop children's skills, which fosters their achievement (for a review, see Rowe et al., 2016). By contrast, a motivational perspective suggests that parent involvement promotes children's achievement by fostering children's motivational resources (for reviews, see Grolnick et al., 1997; Pomerantz et al., 2012). For example, parent involvement may highlight the value of school and encourage children's aspirations; as a consequence, children develop confidence and ownership of their behavior, leading to greater school engagement, which fosters learning and ultimately achievement (e.g., Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).

What is the evidence that parent involvement in children's schooling has positive effects? There have been several meta-analyses examining the effects of different kinds of involvement. These meta-analyses generally yield consistent results: Except for parent assistance with homework, parent involvement is positively associated with children's motivation, engagement, and achievement. In a meta-analysis of studies at the elementary level, Jaynes (2005) found an overall positive association between parent involvement and children's

achievement. The largest effect was for parents' high expectations, which some investigators consider an aspect of parent involvement (e.g., Hill & Tyson, 2009; for a different view, see Barger et al., 2019). At the middle school level, Hill and Tyson (2009) also found that all types of involvement, except homework assistance, were positively associated with children's achievement. Academic socialization, which included parents communicating expectations, fostering aspirations, and discussing learning strategies, had the strongest association.

The most recent meta-analysis by Barger et al. (2019), which included 448 independent studies, yielded small but positive associations between parent involvement at school and children's motivation, engagement, and achievement, regardless of children's developmental phase. The largest positive associations were for parent involvement at home, including discussion and encouragement, as well as engagement in cognitive/intellectual activities. Similar to the prior meta-analyses, parent homework assistance was negatively associated with children's achievement. This was evident regardless of children's developmental phase, as well as other potential moderators, such as family race and ethnicity. However, parent homework assistance was positively associated with children's engagement in school, with no association with their motivation.

Although compelling, the meta-analyses generally included studies examining the association between parent involvement and children's outcomes at *one time point*. It is thus possible that the results reflect not an effect of parent involvement on children but rather an effect of children on parent involvement (e.g., parents may become more involved when children are doing poorly or when children are engaged in school because children invite their involvement). A number of studies, however, using longitudinal designs that permit analyses to adjust for children's earlier motivation, engagement, and achievement as well as other potential confounds (e.g., parent educational attainment and other dimensions of parenting), also yield positive effects of parent involvement (e.g., Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011), with mixed findings for parents' assistance with homework (e.g., Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001).

In sum, the large body of research on parent involvement paints a more optimistic picture than the Robinson and Harris (2014) report. Meta-analyses and longitudinal studies highlight the benefits of parents engaging children in discussions about school, encouraging high aspirations, and helping to ensure children have the best academic experiences possible. Notably, these types of involvement were positively associated with children's achievement in the Robinson and Harris (2014) review as well. We would argue that this is good news for families in that the kinds of activities that appear to be most beneficial are ones in which virtually all parents can engage. Going to school events, volunteering in the classroom, and helping with complex homework may not be possible for all parents due to time, knowledge, and resource constraints. However, most parents can ask about school and encourage their children.

Although the evidence on the effects of many types of parent involvement is encouraging, the findings regarding homework assistance give cause for concern. Why would such involvement be negatively associated with children's achievement? It is possible that the association is due in part to child-to-parent effects, in that parents are more likely to become involved in children's homework when children are struggling. For example, in one study (Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001), children's low achievement predicted increased parent involvement in homework 6 months later. Pomerantz et al. (2007) made the case that homework

may be frustrating for both children and parents for a variety of reasons (e.g., they feel pressure to get the work done as there is a deadline), which may lead parents to be less autonomy supportive (vs. controlling) and affectively positive (vs. negative).

Interestingly, intervention studies in which parents are trained to work with children on homework yield positive effects (Patall et al., 2008). Children of parents trained to provide homework assistance have higher rates of homework completion, fewer homework problems, and improved academic performance. Given that the interventions provided parents strategies for *constructively* helping with homework (e.g., improving the learning environment and helping students improve homework habits) the results suggest that how parents are involved in children's homework is important. As it turns out, the quality of involvement is a crucial piece of the parent involvement puzzle.

### **The quality of parent involvement also matters**

Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017), we focus on two dimensions of the quality of parent involvement that may influence the extent to which it is facilitative. The first, autonomy support, refers to parents taking children's perspectives, providing choice, allowing input into decisions, and engaging in joint problem solving. For example, autonomy-supportive homework assistance could include asking children how they would solve a problem and then providing hints when children need them. In contrast, controlling parenting refers to parents pressuring children with demands, directives, or threats of guilt or love withdrawal, solving problems for them, and prohibiting input and dissent. Controlling homework assistance could include issuing directives on how to solve problems and taking over as soon as children have difficulty. SDT purports that parent autonomy support is important as there is a basic human need to feel volitional and that one has choice. Thus, autonomy-supportive involvement is likely to facilitate children's motivational resources, whereas controlling involvement is likely to undermine such resources.

Parenting is an affective enterprise given the joys and frustrations that both children and parents experience in their day-to-day interactions (Dix, 1991). Parent involvement in children's schooling is no different (Pomerantz et al., 2005), as parents can be affectively positive or negative in their involvement. For example, affectively positive parent homework assistance involves parents displaying positive emotions such as joy, love, and satisfaction while helping children. In contrast, in affectively negative homework assistance parents are irritated and frustrated as well as anxious. SDT views parent positive versus negative affect toward children as important given that it can contribute to the fulfillment of the need for relatedness, defined as the need to feel connected, valued, and supported (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In addition, when parents display dampened positive and heightened negative affect in the academic context, they may convey negative feelings about the material and children's ability to master problems, evoking children's negative feelings about themselves (Pomerantz et al., 2005). Similar to autonomy-supportive and controlling involvement, affectively positive and negative involvement contribute differentially to motivational resources among children, thereby influencing their achievement.

There is much evidence that the more parents are autonomy supportive (versus controlling) in general, the better children's academic adjustment over time (e.g., Bindman et al., 2015;), with similar findings for parents' positive (versus negative) affect toward children as manifest in warmth (vs. hostility; e.g., Estrada et al., 1987). Importantly, research focusing

on the quality of parent involvement in children's schooling specifically yields comparable patterns (e.g., Lerner & Grolnick, 2022). For example, Lerner and Grolnick (2020) found that parent personal involvement was associated with enhanced motivation and achievement among children when parents were autonomy supportive but not when they were controlling. Hokoda and Fincham (1995) found that when mothers were affectively positive in their response to problems that were particularly difficult for children, children were less likely to display a helpless orientation.

Several studies have examined how autonomy supportive versus controlling parents are in assisting with homework. In a longitudinal study, Moroni et al. (2015) measured both the quantity and quality of parent homework assistance during early adolescence. Although the frequency of homework assistance was negatively associated with children's achievement, more supportive assistance predicted enhanced achievement whereas more intrusive assistance predicted poorer achievement over time, adjusting for prior achievement. Similarly, in a longitudinal study, Dumont et al. (2014) found that the more controlling parents' homework involvement was when children were in fifth grade, the poorer children's study habits and achievement in seventh grade. Katz et al. (2011) found that the more parents were supportive of children's autonomy, competence, and relatedness during homework, the more children reported engaging in their homework for autonomous reasons. Research on the affective nature of parents' homework assistance indicates that affectively negative assistance is predictive of poor motivation, engagement, and achievement over time, adjusting for a variety of potential confounds (e.g., Pomerantz et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2022).

### **What contributes to the quality of parent involvement?**

Given the importance of the quality of parent involvement in terms of autonomy support (vs. control) and positive (vs. negative) affect, perhaps the focus should not be on whether parents should be involved, but how to help parents be optimally involved. Thus, we now turn to what hinders versus enables parents in being more constructively involved. Although there are multiple forces that shape the quality of parent involvement (for a review, see Pomerantz & Grolnick, 2017), one that may be key is the pressure parents experience. Grolnick (2003) argued that pressure can come from below (e.g., from the children's skills and abilities and the way they act and react), from above (e.g., expectations others have and the competition around them), and from within (e.g., the internal pressure parents experience to have the child do well). Regardless of its origin, pressure can undermine autonomy-supportive parenting as such parenting requires time and psychological availability, both of which may be undermined by pressure and stress. Similarly, pressure can create negative emotions that result in affectively negative involvement among parents.

Beginning with pressure from below, evidence indicates that parents become more controlling when their children are having difficulty. In the Dumont et al. (2014) study described earlier, children's low reading grades in fifth grade predicted parents being more controlling and less responsive during homework when children were in seventh grade. Importantly, experimental evidence indicates that children's poor performance plays a causal role in parents' controlling behavior (Wuyts et al., 2017). Taken together with the evidence regarding the effects of controlling and affectively negative involvement, this

evidence suggests that parents and children can become entrenched in cycles in which struggling children receive unconstructive homework help which in turn undermines their motivation, engagement, and performance and continues the cycle. This negative cycle may be especially problematic for low achieving children, as they appear to be more sensitive to the negative effects of control than those who achieve more highly (e.g., Ng et al., 2004).

With regard to pressure from without, parents may feel pressure to become involved, especially in their children's homework. Thus, they may become involved because they feel they must rather than because they feel it is helpful or they enjoy the activities. And the reasons parents get involved make a difference for both how much and how parents are involved. For example, when parents are involved for more autonomous reasons (e.g., they feel it is important or enjoy helping), they engage in more school, personal, and cognitive-intellectual involvement (Grolnick, 2015). Importantly, when parents are involved in homework for more autonomous reasons, they display more need supportive behavior when helping with homework (Katz et al., 2011). When parents get involved for more controlled reasons (e.g., because they feel they have to), they are more controlling in engaging in homework, personal, and cognitive-intellectual involvement activities with children (Lerner & Grolnick, 2022).

Finally, parents may feel pressure from within to have their children perform. Given the importance of their role, parents may sometimes hinge their own worth on children's performance. Parent contingent self-worth means feeling more positively about oneself when children are performing well and less positively when children are performing poorly. Since parents might feel compelled to assure their children achieve to maintain their own self-esteem, they may pressure them to perform. Indeed, parent contingent self-worth is associated with more controlling parenting (e.g., Grolnick et al., 2007) and more negative affect when children have difficulty in the academic context (Ng et al., 2019).

These three types of pressures may be particularly salient when it comes to parents helping with homework. First, there may be pressure from below given that, as noted above, parent involvement in homework is often triggered by children struggling—that is, parents generally get involved in homework when children cannot do it on their own. Second, there may be pressure from without, in that parents may feel they must help children with their homework as there is a deadline which they are responsible for ensuring children meet. Third, pressure from within may be particularly likely for homework as there are standards for success that parents may want their children to meet to protect their own self-esteem and perhaps look good in the teacher's eyes. Given these pressures, it is not surprising that parents' involvement in children's homework is often unconstructive.

### **How can educators support high quality parent involvement?**

A large body of research indicates that, in general, parent involvement in children's schooling facilitates children's motivation, engagement, and achievement in school, particularly when it is constructive (e.g., autonomy supportive rather than controlling and positive rather than negative). However, when parent involvement is not constructive it can have costs for children, especially in the homework context. Ostensibly, it may seem that the take home message is that parents should stay out of children's homework. However, sometimes



children need parents' assistance, and the homework context may offer an opportunity for parents to support children. Thus, it is critical to identify how to encourage constructive parent involvement, particularly in the homework context.

It is important to address how to decrease pressure associated with parent involvement. There has been much emphasis on schools creating positive climates for parents in which they feel welcome at their children's school as well as a partner in their children's education. Studies suggest that when parents experience the school climate as positive they are more involved in children's schooling (Park & Holloway, 2013) and children have higher achievement (Lin et al., 2021). Importantly, the quality of parent involvement may also be more constructive: Dettmers et al. (2019) found that when parents felt there was effective communication with the school (e.g., regular information exchange and transparency about decision making), they were more likely to be autonomy supportive and provide competence support when helping with homework. It may be that family-school partnerships decrease some of the pressure from without parents feel in that they experience more flexibility in the learning process, which they may integrate into their help with children's homework. Communications that ensue from such partnerships may also help parents to feel efficacious in helping children, which may alleviate the pressure they experience, particularly in assisting struggling children. Indeed, parents' feelings of efficacy in supporting children's learning are associated with not only higher parent involvement at home (e.g., Park & Holloway, 2013), but also more autonomy-supportive and affectively positive involvement at home, particularly in the homework context (Wu et al., 2022).

Enhanced communication with parents may also allow educators to help parents use effective strategies to help children with homework. However, thought must be given to how to do so, as promoting ways in which parents *should* help could introduce a new layer of pressure into the homework process. In the context of a positive school climate, in which teachers develop positive relationships with parents, parents may be more receptive to tips about how to help children. In addition, these tips can be framed so as not to be taken by parents as pressuring—for example, as strategies that some parents find useful (e.g., when children are having difficulty with math homework, some parents find it useful to start with the first problem children are having difficulty with and ask children to take them through it using questions and hints to help children make progress).

Even more effective may be for educators to think more explicitly about how to reduce or remove the pressure that may accompany homework for so many families. During the elementary school years when parents are most involved in homework (Snyder et al., 2019), this may mean moving away from traditional assignments in which there are right and wrong answers to assignments that foster exploration with emphasis on the process (vs. the final outcome). Or the assignments may have children play a game with a family member that uses the skills children are learning. Such approaches may not only be effective in enhancing the quality of parents' involvement, but also directly enhancing children's learning as they foster more of a mastery (vs. performance) orientation, which can be beneficial for children (for a review, see Wigfield et al., 2021). Teachers may explicitly reduce the pressure on parents by communicating to them that, while children are expected to turn in homework, the answers do not need to be correct. They might stress that in fact, homework may be especially useful to

teachers when it informs them what is challenging for children. In addition, teachers can convey to parents that they do not expect parents to be involved in children's homework, but they can if they so desire, thereby relieving some of the pressure from without.

Strategies to alleviate pressure among parents may be especially important for teachers to consider during times of remote schooling such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many families, remote schooling required heightened parent involvement in terms of monitoring children's attention to the remote classroom, assisting with technological logistics, and ensuring they completed their work (Knopik et al., 2021). This situation likely heightened the pressure on parents through the increased time they had to devote to children's schooling—often while they navigated their own work from home—which they may have felt ill equipped to handle. The challenges for children of remote schooling likely disrupted their motivation, engagement, and learning, leading them to have even more difficulty than usual with their work which also likely increased the pressure parents experienced.

Parents differed in how they dealt with remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic (Knopik et al., 2021). Significantly, Knopik et al. (2021) found that parents adopting what can be considered a controlling style of involvement were more likely than parents adopting more constructive styles to experience stress in regard to remote schooling. Educators can use some of the same strategies suggested above to reduce pressure on parents during remote learning, but other strategies may be important as well. For example, based on Knopik and colleagues' work, it may be important to ensure clear and open communication with parents with the opportunity for parents' views to be considered.

## Conclusion

In sum, parent involvement can be a useful and important tool to help facilitate children's academic adjustment. However, consideration must be given to the type of involvement (e.g., whether parents are assisting with homework or discussing school with children), the quality of involvement (e.g., whether it is autonomy supportive or controlling), and what contributes to the quality of parent involvement. There are many ways that parents, teachers, and school administrators can work together to ensure that parent involvement optimally supports children's academic motivation, engagement, and achievement. Hopefully, this article helps to identify some effective directions for research and action in this effort.

## Note

1. Many researchers and practitioners favor the term family involvement instead of parent involvement to broaden the concept to include whoever is caring for the child. We use the term parent involvement because it is used in the majority of studies addressing the controversy. However, when using the term parent involvement, we include any family members and others who have a role in children's development and education.

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## Additional Resources

1. Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Sheldon, S. B., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., Van Voorhis, F. L., Martin, C. S., Thomas, B. G., Greenfeld, M. D., Hutchins, D. J., & Williams, K. J. (2002). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, fourth edition*. Corwin. <https://resources.corwin.com/partnershipshandbook/student-resources/chapter-8-implementation-teachers-involve-parents-in-schoolwork>

In this book, available online, researchers from Johns Hopkins University share their 20 years of experience working with teachers and education leaders on how schools can create strong partnerships with families. They share research and tools, including interactive homework, to increase family-school collaboration to facilitate student achievement.

2. Grolnick, W.S., & Raftery-Helmer, J. N. (2015). **Core components of family-school connections: Toward a model of need satisfying partnerships**. In S. Sheridan, E. Kim, and E. Moorman (Eds); *Foundational aspects of family-school partnership research* (pp. 15–34). Springer International Publishing.

This chapter discusses family-school partnerships from a self-determination theory perspective, in which such partnerships can satisfy children's and stakeholders' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. It focuses on factors that impede need-satisfying contexts and provides suggestions to break down barriers between families and schools

3. U.S. Department of Education (2013). **Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships**. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED593896.pdf>

This paper describes the opportunities and challenges schools encounter in creating family-school partnerships. It includes case studies of the efforts of communities in three cities, Washington DC, Boston and Santa Clara, to implement best practices in family engagement.

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