

How Parents and Peers Influence Children's School Success

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There have been various forms of school reform proposed and enacted, with widespread sentiment that more is needed. Many parents may find themselves asking if this trend of reform will be enough to ensure their child's academic success, or if they need to do more in the home. What kind of parental involvement matters most? What characterizes the home environments of academically successful students? An extensive body of research has documented the importance of parent involvement to children's school success. One researcher, Laurence Steinberg, says that it matters far more than school reform.

In his book, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, psychologist Steinberg (1996) discusses findings of his 10-year study of 20,000 students in ninth through twelfth grades. Steinberg refers to the important role parents play in closing the gap between a child's ability and his or her actual achievement. A student's performance in school, says Steinberg (1996, p. 123), is influenced but not determined by a student's ability. Although some researchers have noted a connection between homework and academic success, Steinberg found that even typical forms of parental involvement—such as checking homework, monitoring academic involvement from home, encouraging better performance—did not by themselves raise the students' levels of performance. While these behaviors didn't harm children's performance, they weren't as valuable as the types of involvement that physically bring the parent into the school—attending school programs, parent conferences, “back to school” nights, and extracurricular activities (Steinberg, 1996, p. 125). Steinberg suggests that the reason the latter kinds of involvement matter is that they communicate important messages. When parents take time to attend school functions on a regular basis, they send a strong message that school is

important to them and that it should be important to their child. Steinberg adds that teachers and other school personnel notice parents who are involved in this way and are more inclined to listen to their concerns (1996, p. 126).

Successful and Unsuccessful Parental Strategies

Steinberg compares the strategies used by parents of successful and unsuccessful students. When a child performs poorly in some subject, his parents strive to correct the problem themselves without collaborating with the teacher. Perhaps they spend more time overseeing their child's homework, offering more assistance with assignments, or setting up more rigorous study schedules for the child to follow. Parents sometimes criticize the teacher or school, or seek outside help for their child (Ballantine, 1999, p. 170). These measures often fail, observes Steinberg, and as a result, parents feel frustrated and angry. Schoolwork becomes an area of contention at home, further interfering with the child's ability to improve (Steinberg, 1996, p. 127).

In contrast to the above scenario, parents of successful students “work the system,” mobilizing the school on their child's behalf (Steinberg, 1996, p. 127). These parents first phone and then meet with their child's teacher or counselor to discuss their child's problem. They then follow through with any home exercises or other solutions suggested by the school. The strategies used by parents of successful students communicate a powerful message to the child and school—a belief that the school can and wants to educate the child. This confidence, in turn, strengthens the child's belief in the school's effectiveness (Steinberg, 1996, p. 127).

Equally important is how parents express their interest in school and their encouragement of their

child's success (Steinberg et al., 1992, p. 1279). Students who describe their parents as warm, firm, demanding, and democratic report better grades and greater engagement in classroom activities, devote more time to homework, and have higher educational aspirations than their peers (Steinberg et al., 1992, pp. 1266-1278). In contrast, "disengaged" parents who don't ask about their child's progress, spend time in activities with their child, or know their child's friends may have children who are less interested and less successful in school (Steinberg, 1996, pp. 118-121). Other research has also validated the influence of parental monitoring—knowing the whereabouts, activities, and friends of one's child—on a variety of adolescent outcomes, including academic achievement (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000, pp. 66, 90).

Cultural Factors

The culture of the student, Steinberg suggests, becomes a factor in students' academic success when it influences the importance attached to academic achievement. A study of 116 low-income urban African American adolescents illustrated the role of parental monitoring, closeness, and involvement in their academic success. The study suggested that the students' close emotional ties to their parents helped to serve as a "protective emotional harbor" (Bloir, 1997, p. 4) in a peer culture that devalues academic achievement (Bloir, 1997, pp. 1-10). Steinberg confirms the powerful role of peer culture in the school achievement of students of other ethnic groups, adding that it may even undermine some of the effectiveness of otherwise successful parental strategies. While the parental characteristics of successful students were the same for the various ethnic groups studied, Steinberg notes that they did not have the same results for each ethnic group. Black, White, Asian American, and Latino American students who had parents who were warm, firm, supportive, and involved did better than their peers who had parents without those characteristics. Yet, Black students performed worse in school than Asian American students, even when both had the advantage of warm, firm, supportive, and involved

parents. In fact, Steinberg reports that Asian American students from "disengaged homes" got better grades in school than Black students from homes where parents were warm, firm, supportive, and involved (1996, pp. 133-137). According to Steinberg, this finding shows the effects of peer pressure. Peer groups negate the positive influence of effective parenting in Black homes while countering the negative influence of ineffective parenting in Asian American households (1996, p. 137).

Peer Group Influences

The power of peer pressure peaks in early adolescence at the same time, unfortunately, that parental involvement in school declines (Steinberg, 1996, p. 142). Peers can positively or negatively affect each other's academic performance. Not surprisingly, the more successful students had friends whose grades were high, who spent more time on homework, who had greater educational aspirations, and who devoted more time to extracurricular activities (Steinberg, 1996, pp. 147-148).

In his review of friends' activity patterns from different ethnic groups, Steinberg found that Asian American students' friends placed a greater emphasis on academics, had higher performance standards, devoted more time to homework, and earned higher grades in school than other students. Steinberg found the opposite to be true for Black and Hispanic adolescents, with White students falling somewhere between the Asian American students and the Black and Hispanic students (Steinberg, 1996, pp. 156-167).

Use of Time

Another way peers influence academic achievement has to do with the number of hours spent socializing. Again Steinberg found differences among ethnic groups in the time spent "hanging out" with friends, "partying," and "spending time with a boyfriend or girlfriend," with Asian American students reporting half as much time socializing as other students. Socializing with friends was one of three time-use

factors associated with lower school achievement. The other two were working long hours at a part-time job and spending more than 20 hours a week on an extracurricular activity (Steinberg, 1996, pp. 180-181).

Steinberg concludes that school achievement is more dependent on the ways students structure their lives and on the priorities they and their parents hold than it is on the particular schools students attend. No efforts at school reform will matter until school success becomes a necessary and worthwhile goal, says Steinberg (1996, p. 182).

In her book, *Getting Our Kids Back on Track: Educating for the Future*, Janine Bempechat (2000) concurs with the need for parents to prioritize children's use of time. Parents commit their children to many extracurricular activities in a desire to encourage well-rounded development. Children who are only good in school are described in such disparaging terms as "nerds, geeks, and brainiacs," according to Bempechat (2000, p. 46). Bempechat advocates a middle ground approach—one that acknowledges the value of multiple experiences for children while placing academic achievement at the top of every family's priority list.

Parents and peers will invariably influence student success, for better and for worse. It is up to parents, argues Steinberg, to determine how successful their child will become by shaping the child's attitude towards school in deed and word. Parenting academically successful children means consistently conveying the message that school matters, talking with and visiting teachers and school administrators, and prioritizing school performance above other activities (Ballantine, 1999, pp. 170-171).

Sources

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