



The impact of parent engagement on learner success

A digest of research for teachers and parents

>> Somewhere between 75% and 85% of a child's waking hours are spent outside school

>> Parent engagement in the educational development of their children improves attainment

Headlines

Parents are a major influence on a child's success in life. While the quality of schools and the nature of the child's peer group matter significantly, it is from the home that young people derive lasting effects on their character, mindset and attainment.

We should not be surprised that parents have an influential role in the education of their children. They are after all a child's first teacher well before the formal world of education is encountered. And while estimates vary, somewhere between 75% and 85% of a child's waking hours are spent outside the influence of school.

Parent engagement in the educational development of their children improves attainment more than any other single factor. Parents can help their child most by having regular and meaningful conversations with them, by setting high aspirations and by demonstrating their own interest in and support of learning at home and at school.

While research shows a clear relationship between levels of parent engagement and levels of student achievement, it does not yet adequately describe exactly why certain kinds of parent or school-initiated engagement work best. As yet there is no handbook of parent engagement.

But finding answers to these questions is a major priority for national educational departments globally and must be high on the list of any school wanting its students to become successful learners.

Definition of terms

To date "*parent engagement*" and "*parent involvement*" have been used relatively interchangeably to describe the range of activities undertaken by parents to support their children both at home and at school.

We have adopted the term "*parent engagement*" throughout this publication to signal a more active and personal level of participation in learning in the home than "parent involvement" which is often associated with school generated requirements – for example school trips, parent evenings used to inform on student progress and social events such as fairs and theatrical evenings.

By "*learner success*" we mean more than just student achievement as recorded in public examinations and school tests – important though these are. We are also as concerned with the development of character strengths, especially those dispositions, attributes and skills associated with being an effective learner. These are spelled out on the next page.

"*Family learning*" describes all those informal learning activities undertaken at and from home by parents with their children.

Small numbers in the text (ie UNESCO¹) refer to research study sources listed on page 8.

>> In the last few decades there has been a growing recognition across the world of the importance of engaging parents

A brief history of parent engagement

The idea that teachers in schools are solely responsible for the education of children and teenagers is relatively new when set against the wide sweep of recorded history.

In the early pioneer days of most countries, parents were their children's only teachers, along with other experienced members of the tribe. Then, as human beings settled and prospered simple one room school buildings were erected or an existing space was used for the purpose of teaching more than just the children of a specific family. The teachers were frequently local mothers with skills and enthusiasm or perhaps a young woman or man not yet set on an occupation with a natural affinity for working with children. Frequently school followed the rhythms of life, open only when children were not required for harvesting or other work. Whether or not children went to school, and for how long, was not regulated.

In the last two centuries, as schooling has gradually become compulsory for most people in the developed world, the roles of teacher and parent have grown apart. It was only in the latter part of the nineteenth century, with the major expansion of formal schooling in many developed countries, that parent teacher associations began to be created specifically to engage parents more in children's education in some parts of the world.

But little more than a generation ago parents were still being left firmly outside the school gate and parent teacher associations were more likely to be used to fund raise for school extras and for charity than to encourage learning in the home.

However, in the last few decades there has been a growing recognition across the world of the importance of engaging parents. Often this has taken the form of parenting programmes in areas where, for socio-economic reasons, parents have not felt able or willing to be involved in the education of their children. Most recently the role of parenting has been acknowledged in legislation in the USA in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind Act and, in 2004, in England where similar legislation is known as Every Child Matters.

Parent engagement for a changing world

In a rapidly changing world, national education departments all over the world are recognising that successful learners don't just need good knowledge and understanding (typically measured by public examinations and school tests). Also essential are the habits of mind, dispositions and wider skills of effective learners². Some of these are listed in the box below.

Of course students require a level of knowledge in a number of subject areas, but increasingly students need to develop learning skills that will stand them in good stead throughout their lives enabling them to adapt and learn whatever they need to.

With the advent of the Internet, "know-how" has become at least as important as "know-what". For example, it is at least as important to *know how* to find out what the capital of Denmark is than simply to *know* the name and location of one city from memory.

Some useful skills and dispositions for learning and living in the 21st Century

Noticing things	Adapting to change	Questioning	Scepticism
Using learning tools	Independent learning	Collaborating	Empathy
Problem-solving	Persisting	Self-regulating	Experimenting
Being positive	Using humour	Practising	Reflecting
Intuitive thinking	Goal setting	Unlearning	Transferring learning

» Perhaps the most interesting finding was the fact that the more parents and children talk to each other, the better students achieve

» Research shows that three aspects of character are especially useful for successful learning, self-regulation, empathy and persistence

Key themes in parent engagement research

Better evidence

While there has been an increasing interest in understanding more about the impact of parent engagement on student's learning, it is only in the last thirty or so years that such research has become more systematic and reliable. This is partly because it is notoriously difficult to disentangle the impact of parents on children's performance from the many other factors which influence the development of young learners, such as social and economic context, the broader family, peer groups, teachers and schools. It is also because it is difficult to analyse styles of parenting and kinds of parent engagement precisely and accurately enough to be sure of exactly what is going on.

Three recent pieces of research are illustrative of the kinds of robust studies to which we have turned in this short paper. The first came from UNESCO³ in 1997, the second from the USA in 2002⁴ and the third from the UK in 2003⁵. John Hattie's most recent and extensive piece of research into all of the major impacts on student achievement from New Zealand⁶ has also been helpful. He is very clear, for example, that parent engagement is more significant in learner success than structural issues (such as single parent families, for example).

Parent engagement helps to raise students' achievement

How well students' achieve is affected by many complex factors. So it is difficult to disentangle the role played by parenting set against, for example, the social class of the parents or a good teacher. But through longitudinal studies it is possible to analyse data with statistical techniques in sufficient detail to isolate the impact of parent engagement.

In recent years research has made it clear that parent engagement does make a significant contribution to children's achievement⁷. Perhaps the most interesting finding is the fact that the more parents and

children talk to each other about meaningful subjects, the better students achieve; home conversation really matters. Other studies have shown how parents can positively influence attitudes to, for example, science⁸. One of the most influential pieces of research carried out in the UK⁹ concluded that when it comes to comparing the impact of parent engagement to the role of school: "Parent involvement [is] a much bigger factor than school effects in shaping achievement."

Parent engagement helps to develop more confident and adjusted children

While the potentially positive influence of parents on academic achievement is significant, parents also have a powerful role in developing their children's character.

A considerable amount of research shows that three aspects of character are especially useful for successful learning. These are:

- **self-regulation** – the ability to regulate emotions and remain resilient, for example, not to be subject to temper tantrums and to be able to survive reasonable set backs
- **empathy** – being able to imagine things from another person's perspective, to understand where they are coming from
- **persistence** – being able to stick at things even when they are difficult¹⁰.

Various studies show how the development of these aspects of character are influenced by parents¹¹. Socio-economic factors are highly significant in this area – hence the growth of parenting programmes for families from financially disadvantaged backgrounds across the world who generally have many other challenges to face in addition to their important role as parents.

It is also widely acknowledged that good levels of parent engagement normally have a beneficial impact on student behaviour at school¹².

»» Parent engagement works largely through the setting of high aspirations and the shaping of a young learner's self-concept

Parent engagement works largely through the setting of high aspirations and the shaping of a young learner's self-concept

In his review of the factors contributing to student achievement, John Hattie concludes that "parents can have a major effect in terms of the encouragement and expectations that they transmit to their children."¹³ And many other studies confirm the central but indirect role that parents play by shaping their children's concept of themselves as learners¹⁴.

This takes many forms, for example, the setting of goals, the displaying of enthusiasm, the encouragement of good study habits, the valuing of enquiry, of experimentation and of learning new things, and the enjoyment of reading.

Of all potential parent activities, parent expectation produces the largest effect size with regard to children's achievement¹⁵. Generally, not surprisingly, it seems clear that the greatest effects are achieved the earlier they occur in a child's life¹⁶.

The greatest impact from parent engagement comes from what parents do in their homes

While schools benefit in many ways from the engagement of parents, it is what parents do at home that has the greatest influence on student's achievement.

A range of constructive activities at home appears to help to create successful learners¹⁷. These include:

- the use of interesting and complex vocabulary
- discussions about school progress
- conversations about external events
- encouragement to read for a range of purposes
- cultural activities such as visiting libraries, museums and historic sites
- encouragement to develop hobbies
- encouragement to question
- encouragement to try out new things, and
- opportunities to undertake everyday household tasks.

Monitoring the amount of time spent watching television is important as although it can have positive effects, its overall impact is negative¹⁹. And, as has been evident throughout this review, time spent in the company of adults who demonstrate their own interest in learning new things is demonstrably helpful.

Different parenting styles have different effects

Being clearer about how different kinds of parenting affects children's development is notoriously difficult. Nevertheless, some factors repeatedly emerge as being important in the research literature²⁰:

All parents are different and their homes necessarily reflect this. However, there is growing research evidence to suggest 'tough love' is most associated with successful outcomes for children²¹. Tough love involves setting and sticking to clear boundaries along with a warm and affectionate approach. Children brought up in this way are more likely to be self-regulating, cooperative and socially responsible.

»» It is what parents do at home that has the greatest impact on students' achievement

Six factors which affect achievement

- 1 **Expectations** - setting high and consistent standards
- 2 **Routines** - establishing ones which promote health, well-being and regular study
- 3 **Opportunity to learn** - creating a home learning environment that stimulates learning
- 4 **Support** - showing interest, giving specific praise and teaching social and learning skills
- 5 **Culture** - establishing a warm, cooperative, positive environment
- 6 **Role modelling** - demonstrating the habits of mind and behaviours of successful learners

>> Parents are more likely to be involved if they see it as part of their job as a parent

Six types of Parent Engagement	
Type 1 - Parenting	Helping all families to have the basic home conditions in place including active parenting strategies and regular communication with school
Type 2 - Communicating	Designing effective home-to-school and school-to-home communication methods which engage all parents regularly
Type 3 - Volunteering	Recruiting volunteer parents to help in school in classes and in extra-curricular activities
Type 4 - Learning at home	Providing good information to enable all parents to help with homework and offer other family learning activities
Type 5 - Decision-making	Including parents in decision-making activities to build a sense of ownership including being involved in governance
Type 6 - Collaborating with community	Finding and using resources from the wider parent community to enrich school life

>> Recent research has shown how important it is to praise children for what they specifically do (especially where evident effort is involved) rather than simply for being 'smart'

Different levels and kinds of engagement

Joyce Epstein, Research Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University in the USA, has developed a widely cited and respected typology of the different kinds of ways in which schools can engage with parents. See above.

Whether or not parents choose to become involved in supporting their child's school depends on a number of factors including their own personal and cultural experiences of school, the nature of their working lives and the degree to which the school genuinely seeks to engage them in clear and accessible language.

One other factor is significant, the degree to which parents attribute responsibility for the educational success of their children; parents are more likely to be involved if they see it as part of their job as a parent.

Some interesting tensions

The higher a child's level of attainment, the more likely parents want to get involved²². Yet it is those doing less well at school who may need their parents' active engagement most and those in the "middle" who may not be realizing their potential. Parents and teachers talk more when there are problems not when learning is progressing well; this may account for the perception, for parents, that parent engagement means giving support to children where, for teachers, it tends to mean improving the behaviour of students.

While it is generally helpful to encourage children by the use of praise, recent research²³ has shown how important it is to praise children for what they specifically do (especially where evident effort is involved) rather than simply for being "smart". Praise of the former kind is likely to promote a belief that, with effort, anything can be achieved. And a "growth mindset" of this kind lies at the heart of every successful learner.

Practical ideas for schools

Influenced by the findings in this research digest, schools might like to:

- **Have a clear understanding of what they mean by “Learner success” (especially those aspects which go beyond academic achievement)**
- **Develop, in partnership with parents, a clear strategy for parent engagement, including regular activities under all the six headings below**
- **Hold an annual festival of parenting engagement to highlight their work in this area.**

Using Epstein’s framework (or something similar) schools could:

1 Parenting

- Use the school’s web-site and publications to suggest practical ways in which parenting for learning can be developed
- Hold parent workshops and offer home visits
- Express clear expectations about time spent on homework, on informal learning, on television, about the use of computers and the value of reading to/with and talking to their children
- Educate parents about child health and well-being and the need for enough sleep

2 Communicating

- Invest time in establishing personalised communications with all parents
- On at least a half-termly basis, make sure parents know what their child is going to be learning and have some simple ideas as to how they can support them, as well as web-support. Ideally this should be done on a weekly basis in advance of the week ahead and available online.
- Identify and remove educational jargon from all school literature and encourage all staff to speak to parents in plain English
- Make it possible for all new parents to observe lessons at first hand
- Use technology – e-mail, scanning etc – to communicate as regularly as possible, ensuring that they are often relaying positive messages

3 Volunteering

- Annually survey the talents and skills of their parents
- Offer a range of opportunities for all parents to contribute their time and talents
- Clearly identify parent and teacher champions for all of the voluntary activities run by the school

4 Learning at home

- Provide books and online materials to help parents understand how best they can support their children’s learning at home
- Always suggest activities, beyond homework, which families might choose to do to support classroom learning
- Host sessions for parents about how children learn
- Create an illustrated map of all the informal learning providers in the area – libraries, museums, sports centres, sites of local interest etc

5 Decision-making

- Put real effort into creating and supporting a thriving Friends and Family Associations. Make the prime momentum of these organisations the encouragement of parent engagement in learning
- Consult parents wherever possible and always explain their decision-making processes clearly
- Provide a range of opportunities for parents to be involved in an advisory capacity.

6 Collaborating with community

- Use parents and local organisations for trips, special camps and other activities
- Build alliances with those parents who have specific resources to share and with local community resources
- Establish a programme of lectures, classes, workshops and visits to enrich the school curriculum.

These are just a few ideas; there are many others that schools will want to try out.

Practical ideas for parents

Influenced by the findings in this research digest, parents might like to:

- **Consider the ways in which they can demonstrate their own interest in learning**
- **Make sure that they model some of the skills listed on page 2**
- **Invest time in having good conversations about their child's progress, about their own beliefs, expectations and feelings, making sure to listen carefully to what is being said!**

Using the 6 Factors Framework on page 4 (or something similar) parents could:

1 Expectations

- Be clear about their high-expectations
- Look ahead and help their child to set goals
- Make clear their belief that all children can get smarter and learn more effectively through effort and positive thinking
- Show affection and warmth while at the same time maintaining consistent boundaries of expected behaviour

2 Routines

- Set clear routines for the time before and after school and for weekends and encourage your child to be involved in a reasonable amount of regular extra-curricular activity
- Use mealtimes as opportunities to talk
- Set aside time to read with their child and to look at their school and home work
- Create space for their child to tell them when s/he is under stress or worried

3 Opportunity to learn

- Ensure their home has lots of games, puzzles and books
- Make sure that their child has a quiet place to study
- Find things to learn together on a regular basis, ideally with parents sometimes creating special one-to-one time with each child
- Use everyday activities, cooking, gardening, making things, reading the newspaper to do things together and get to know one another more

4 Support

- Celebrate effort and hard work whenever possible
- Tune in to the way their child learns, providing hands-on experiences where possible and also opportunities to reflect
- Teach their child to practise – setting aside time, setting goals, repeating the hard bits, watching experts etc
- Make it clear that learning involves making mistakes and requires effort

5 Culture

- Encourage their child's questioning!
- Notice what their child loves doing and be on the look-out for their emerging passions
- Talk about times when they are finding something difficult and what they are doing to cope

6 Role modelling

- Talk about their own learning, successes, frustrations, times they have had to persist at something
- Take the opportunity to share their passions and show how they make time to do things that matter to them
- Talk about people they admire.
- There are many other good ideas parents can use.

Advice on how to implement many of the suggestions in this list how to do this can be found in the GEMS parent engagement website www.learnaspirebe.com

References

- 1 Sam Redding (1997) *Parents and Learning*. Lausanne, Switzerland: UNESCO
- 2 See Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton (2009) *Wider skills for learning; what are they, how can they be cultivated, and how could they be measured*. London: National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts and Guy Claxton (2002) *Building Learning Power*. Bristol: TLO Ltd
- 3 Sam Redding (1997) *Parents and Learning*. Lausanne, Switzerland: UNESCO
- 4 Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp (2002) *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Austin, Texas: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools
- 5 Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchar (2003) *The impact of parent involvement, parent support and family education on pupil achievements and adjustment: A literature Review* London: Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Another useful piece of research is published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (successor to DfES) Alma Harris and Janet Goodall (2007) *Engaging parents in raising achievement; do they know they matter?* London: Department for Children, Schools and Families
- 6 John Hattie (2009) *Visible Learning; a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge
- 7 See Esther Sui-Chu and Jon Willms (1996) *Effects of parent involvement on eight grade achievement*, *Sociology of Education*, 69 (2), 126-141
- 8 Rani George and David Kaplan (1998) A structural model of parent and teacher influences on science attitudes of eight graders, *Science Education* 82, 93-109
- 9 Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchar, already cited
- 10 For a good summary of the research, see Jen Lexmond and Richard Reeves (2009) *Building Character* London: Demos
- 11 See Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp (2002) already cited above
- 12 Alma Harris and Janet Goodall (2008) *Do parents know they matter? Engaging all parents in learning* *Educational Research* Vol 50, No 3 277-289
- 13 John Hattie (2009) already cited
- 14 See Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchar, already cited
- 15 William Jeynes (2005) *Parent involvement and student achievement: a meta-analysis*. Boston: Harvard Family Research Project
- 16 See, for example, Kathy Sylva et al 2004 DCSF/University of London Institute of Education. The emphasis on early intervention has been reflected in the name of the new State Department in Victoria, Australia called The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
- 17 See Sandra Christenson and Cathryn Peterson (2008) *Parenting for School Success Minnesota*: University of Minnesota Extension
- 18 See Bill Lucas and Alistair Smith (2009) (2nd Edition) *Help your child to succeed; the essential guide for parents*. London: Network Continuum
- 19 John Hattie, already cited
- 20 This table is adapted from Sandra Christenson and Cathryn Peterson, already cited
- 21 See Jen Lexmond and Richard Reeves, already cited
- 22 See Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchar, already cited
- 23 Carol Dweck (2009) *Mindset; the new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine

This digest was researched and written by Professor Bill Lucas in collaboration with other colleagues at the Centre for Real-World Learning with the financial support of GEMS.

About the Centre for Real-World Learning

Established in 2008, the Centre for Real-World Learning (CRL) at The University of Winchester aims to understand better the kinds of intelligence that enable people to pursue real-life interests and respond to real-life challenges. Creating successful learners is a core interest of its Co-Directors, Professor Bill Lucas and Professor Guy Claxton and of the CRL team.

www.winchester.ac.uk/realworldlearning

About GEMS

GEMS Education is the largest private kindergarten to grade 12 education provider in the world. It has a global network of world class international schools that reach nearly 100,000 students from 125 different nationalities. GEMS Education employs 9,000 education professionals, specialists and staff. www.gemseducation.com

GEMS has a dedicated parent engagement website at www.learnaspirebe.com

