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Parental Involvement That Works . . . Because It's Age-Appropriate

by William H. Jeynes



Abstract

With the right kind of support from both teachers and parents, students may achieve better academic outcomes. This analysis of the literature on parental involvement in their children's academic life uncovers the most important types of interactions for students at different age levels.

Key words: elementary education, secondary education, research/statistics, parental involvement

One of the greatest lessons I've learned about parenting is that just because you're a good parent with a 6-year-old does

not mean that you will be a good parent with a 16-year-old. Good parenting practices are not static, but change to some degree depending on the age of the child.

This declaration was made by the parent of one of my students, and research supports its validity. Over the

last three decades, a substantial body of research has accrued indicating that parental involvement has a considerable degree of impact at both the elementary and secondary school levels (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Those studies have identified the components of parental involvement that have the highest degree of influence (Christian, Morrison, & Bryant, 1998). However, recent meta-analyses have been instrumental in suggesting another trend that is difficult to discern via other modes of analysis. A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a given

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subject to determine the aggregated results of that research.

According to these meta-analyses, the overall body of research suggests that the most effective parental involvement components are not the same for those with young children as they are for those with adolescents (Jeynes, 2005, 2007b). Specifically, overt expressions of parental involvement are associated with higher academic outcomes among elementary school students, but are no longer associated with these better results when students reach high school (Jeynes, 2005, 2007b). By the time students are in secondary school, virtually all the aspects of parental involvement that yield higher academic outcomes are subtle in nature (Jeynes, 2005, 2007b).

What the Data Show

The results just described have rather dramatic implications for the advice teachers should give caregivers regarding parental engagement, because the right kind of involvement can have significant ramifications for student academic achievement. These findings appear to support the notion that the most efficacious type of parenting during a student's elementary school years is often not the most suitable for the adolescent years (Hulbert, 2003; Steinberg, 2004). Specifically, family activities such as checking homework, establishing household rules for when it is time for work and leisure, and attending school functions are associated with higher scholastic outcomes to a statistically significant degree among elementary school students, but have little or no relationship to these outcomes at the

secondary school level (Jeynes, 2005, 2007b).

Consistent with other research, these results show that the most effective parents are the ones who adapt to the changing dynamics in their children's lives (Berzonsky, 2004). To be sure, this is not a new insight. Many teachers, parents, and children can share anecdotal examples that support this conclusion. For example, younger children often become demonstratively excited when their parents come to see them in a school play (Cherlin, 2008). In contrast, adolescents may respond in a variety of ways. Some will be enthusiastic about the visit; others will show muted appreciation; a certain number will not be thankful; and still others will actually be embarrassed by their parents' presence (Townsend, 2006).

Similar differential reactions by age are also common for parental initiatives such as checking homework and maintaining household rules (Shumow, Schmidt, & Kackar, 2008). Young children often have a sense of increased security and classroom confidence when they know their parents have looked over their homework (Glasgow & Whitney, 2009). They also are more likely to cooperate with and be responsive to homework checking and household rules (Glasgow & Whitney, 2009). In contrast, adolescents, almost by nature, have an aversion to obeying rules and being subject to having their homework checked (Caissey, 1994; Fuller, 2009). When a parent asks whether the homework is completed, the teen often responds,

"Yes, I know, I know" or "Yes, I did it already." Research has shown that such answers are typical whether or not the student has actually completed the homework (Shumow et al., 2008). Adolescents are more resistant to rules than they were at a younger age, and myriad teens regard their age bracket as their opportunity to question the majority of rules practiced by humanity (Caissey, 1994; Fuller, 2009).

Subtle approaches are generally best with adolescents. For example, parents can be involved in their children's lives by taking each one out, one-on-one, for a meal once a month. During those private times, a parent may share personal stories of what it was like to be an adolescent; talk transparently about grades, relationships, and the challenges of being a teenager; and open lines of communication so that important issues may be discussed. In addition, a parent may simultaneously express love and high expectations to a daughter, for example, during a quiet moment, as well as share feelings toward her. A parent might begin like this:

You will probably never understand until you are a parent how much I love you! I love you just because you are you, but I also believe you are capable of a great deal. You have many gifts and talents that others do not have. If you apply yourself and give your best effort, you can succeed probably more than you can imagine. At times, you will have setbacks, and we will love you through it all. All we hope is that in this journey called life, you will always give it your best.

The Good News

The meta-analyses conducted on parental involvement demonstrate a salient truism that will encourage most parents and teachers. That is, although the effect sizes for parental involvement overall were somewhat smaller for secondary students—(.53) versus elementary students (.75)—the outcomes of parental engagement at the secondary school level are still substantial and statistically significant. These results are especially uplifting when one considers that meta-analyses provide the most complete insight possible into parental involvement.

What this means is that the many parents who believe they have a dearth of sway once their children turn 13 actually still have remarkable influence. The misconception is perpetuated because adolescents frequently do not want to let their parents know the degree to which they are indeed listening and internalizing many of the truths their parents are passing on to them. Frequently, the extent of the parents' influence does not become ostensible until the youth has "graduated" from adolescence into adulthood (Townsend, 2006). In fact, the results of these meta-analyses confirm that efficacious and conscientious parenting does have an impact at this age, even though teens may commonly do their best to make this evidence seem intangible and nominal (Jeynes, 2005, 2007b).

According to the meta-analyses, although the effect sizes for overall parental involvement are smaller at the secondary school level than at the elementary school level by nearly 30%, subtle aspects of that involvement are

actually larger for secondary school students. For example, the influence of healthy communication between parents and their children is about 33% greater at the secondary school level than it is at the elementary school level.

Similarly, for parental style, which reflects raising children with a balanced approach of emphasizing love and disciplined structure in the home, the effect sizes were 12–14% larger for secondary school students than for elementary. The effect sizes for parental expectations, although about 20% smaller than they were for elementary school students, were nevertheless quite substantial for secondary students. It is true that the impact of parents attending school functions and establishing household rules for this age group is negligible and apparently less of a factor than it is at the elementary school level. Rather, to be an efficacious parent of teens, focusing on the more subtle aspects of parental involvement, in particular, fosters greater benefits.

Whatever adolescents might want their parents to believe, research shows that parental engagement does have a noteworthy and probably, in some respects, even a prodigious relationship with academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007a). At the same time, most social scientists, parents, and teachers are not cognizant of this relationship, and current educational policy does not reflect this reality (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Instead, most educational policy is based on antiquated conceptions that focus on overt manifestations of parental involvement which tend to be more effective in

a child's elementary school years rather than on the subtler aspects of involvement that become more salient at the secondary school level.

From Research to Practice

The findings of these meta-analyses have significant ramifications for teaching, parenting, and the types of partnerships educators should try to develop with parents. First, both teachers and parents need to understand that the best type of practices to draw out the most in youth academically change over time. The principles that apply to best parental involvement practices clearly apply to teacher involvement as well. What are ostensibly the best strategies to employ among elementary school children are not the most effective in their secondary school years. During a youth's younger years, they need structured activities and any assignments that help them develop self-discipline. If this orientation can be practiced consistently in both the school and home, it will surely be effective.

As a child develops and procures a deeper sense of self-concept, a more subtle approach is the most effective. For example, high levels of expectations and positive communication are particularly important for children to flourish. In addition, too much reliance on regimen can produce an opposite and equal reaction by adolescent students. Parents should not express high expectations in a way that rigidly emphasizes, "You will go to Harvard," but rather in a loving and supportive way that subtly communicates that the child should do his or her best.

Table 1. Practical Ideas for Parental Support at Different Ages.

Aspects of Parental Involvement	Elementary School Child	Secondary School Child
<i>Setting Rules and Expectations</i>	Emphasize household rules, such as leisurely activities are allowed only after homework has been completed.	As the child grows and demonstrates behavior worthy of trust, emphasize the expectations of trying his or her best.
<i>Sharing Books</i>	Read to the child.	Take the child out to lunch and communicate about the books that have most influenced the parent's life.
<i>Demonstrating Love</i>	Express love verbally, spend a lot of time with the child via play, and attend school functions.	Express love verbally and in a multitude of behaviors to reinforce that love. For example, celebrate a "thanks for being you day!"

Second, teachers need to inform parents about these principles and valuable forms of parental engagement at different ages for their children (Jeynes, 2005, 2007b, 2012). Most mothers, fathers, and caregivers want to be involved in their children's schooling, but are not knowledgeable about how they can most productively become involved. They frequently look to educators to provide that guidance, and it is vital that instructors be able to provide that information. In this way, teachers can help mothers and fathers transition from rearing young children to parenting adolescents. There are few more vital services that educators can provide than this one.

Third, educators should be cognizant that the partnership existing between parents and teachers will be somewhat different depending on the age of the child. Elementary school teachers have the advantage of being able to specify particular practices, such as checking

homework, establishing household rules, and attending school functions. On the other hand, secondary school teachers need to instruct parents to consider the youth's spirit and emotions, even more than they have in the past. Table 1 provides practical ideas for parental support at different ages. Remember, however, that with secondary school students, it is the heart behind these activities more than the behaviors themselves that is most important.

Fourth, there is a possibility that older students may respond better to less direct forms of parental involvement because they are weary from the direct pressure of high-stakes testing, which in contemporary American society begins at an increasingly young age (Jeynes, 2006). To the extent this possibility is true, American educators and government leaders may be advised to reduce the number of high-stakes tests they administer to children in the lower grades (Jeynes, 2006).

Closing Thoughts

The results of meta-analytic research indicate that the most effective modes of parental involvement are different for youth in elementary and secondary school. These findings should give guidance and hope to all, but especially to parents of secondary school students. ■

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