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of special interest to... **PARENTS**

Why (and How) We *Have* to Get Involved in our Children's Education

Current research about parents' involvement in their children's schools gives us good news and bad news. The good news is: Parents have far more influence on their children's lives than schools do. The bad news is: Parents have far more influence on their children's lives than schools do.

That's right, the good news is the same as the bad news. The message is positive because we—the parents, the families, the people who know our kids the best and care about them the most—can and do shape our kids' lives more than anything or anyone else. (Yes, even when they're teenagers.) But there's a downside too. Since we have such an influence, we have use it positively. If we don't follow through, we are doing our kids a terrible disservice.

Research shows we're #1

According to the *Strong Families, Strong Schools* report, three factors account for almost 90% of the difference in 8th-grade math scores nationwide. The three "miracle ingredients" for school success are things that parents can have control over:

- making sure the student attends school regularly
- having a variety of reading materials at home
- limiting the time spent watching television

These factors account for almost all the differences in average student achievement across the states—far more than factors like racial/ethnic background or parent's income. And they don't cost any money! All three factors are varieties of *parent involvement*, which is what makes biggest difference in any child's education.

Involvement has many faces

Parent and family involvement can take many forms. Here are some other ways to stay involved:

- Read aloud to younger children; talk with older children about the books they are reading
- Check your younger child's homework every night; ask older children what assignments they are working on and whether they need any help
- Help your child learn time management and "pacing" for completing major assignments
- Make sure your child gets enough sleep on school nights
- Take your child to the public library regularly
- Visit the school (not just on Open House night!)
- Go to your child's concerts, plays, sports events (kids get better grades when their parents attend events—really!)
- Stay in contact with the teachers, not just when problems arise

- Participate in Parent-Teacher-Student Association activities
- Volunteer: help out in the office or be a ride-along parent for field trips
- Help your child select classes to take; encourage him/her to choose challenging subjects
- Insist on high standards of behavior (no skipping school, no cheating on tests)
- Advocate for education at local or state levels
- Vote in school board elections

As you see, some types of involvement happen right at home, some at the school, and some in the larger community. Family involvement is anything that sends this essential message from parent to child: “your schoolwork is important to me! I expect you to learn, and I want to help make it possible.” But it’s good news/bad news again. If we *do* make that effort, our kids *will* benefit. If we don’t, they won’t.

Going against the trends

So: if parental involvement is such a key factor in children’s success in school, why aren’t more parents getting involved? There are several cultural trends that work to keep us *uninvolved*, and if we’re not aware and careful, our kids can get swept under in the cross-currents.

“Leave it to the experts”

First, our culture respects trained professionals. (That’s one reason why educators are so anxious to be seen as professionals in the first place.) The flip side is that we tend to discount any *non*-professional opinions. Many parents aren’t sure of the value of their own “non-expert” contributions.

—Look at it this way: we are experts about our own kids. We’ve watched them grow up, we spend the time with them, we *know* them. Their teachers have the general knowledge, we have the specific knowledge. That should make parents and teachers partners, not adversaries.

“Give them their independence”

Second, a lot of us believe the myth that teenagers want independence more than anything else. So we try to grant it to them: we “give them space,” we “try not to pry.” We stop asking “how was school

today?” much less anything specific about the Biology lab report or the irregular French verbs. We back away out of their lives.

—Yes, independence is important, but only as one piece of the picture. What a teenager craves most is *to be taken seriously as a unique person*. Gaining autonomy is part of that, of course. But establishing a person-to-person relationship (instead of parent-to-child) is even more important. Teenagers want *connection* with the significant adults in their lives.

“I don’t have time”

Third, many parents are simply running out of time. Many households seem to be scheduled out in hour-by-hour detail. Low-income parents are frequently working at two or three jobs to make ends meet. As reported in *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, 40% of all parents across the country and 66% of employed parents with children under 18 say they do not have enough time for their children. What’s wrong with this picture?!

—Good news/bad news again: On the one hand, we know *can* make time for the things that are most important to us. On the other hand, if we *don’t* make time to be involved in our children’s learning, we send the clear message that their education doesn’t matter to us.

Conclusion

Family involvement that makes the children’s education a top priority in the home has more impact on the children’s school success than anything else. Positive family involvement can mean the difference between good grades and bad grades, between graduation and dropping out, between going on to college or professional training and getting stuck in dead-end, low-wage work.

Actions speak louder than words. What message do we want to send to our children?

Resources

Get Involved! How Parents and Families Can Help Their Children Do Better in School, (undated) at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/PFIE/families.html>

Strong Families, Strong Schools, U.S. Department of Education, 1995; summary online at <http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families/strong/>