

Background

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Academic Success Begins at Home: How Children Can Succeed in School

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American taxpayers invest heavily in education. Last year, spending on public K–12 education totaled \$553 billion, about 4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006.¹ For each child enrolled in a public elementary or secondary school, expenditures averaged \$9,266 that year—an increase of 128 percent, adjusted for inflation, since 1970.²

Despite this increase in public spending, student achievement and educational attainment over the last four decades has remained relatively flat. In 2007, a significant portion of students, disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, scored “below basic” in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Sadly, in many of the nation’s largest cities, fewer than half of high school students graduate.³

While academic research has consistently shown that increased spending does not correlate with educational gains,⁴ the research does show a strong relationship between parental influences and children’s educational outcomes, from school readiness to college completion. Two compelling parental factors emerge:

1. family structure, i.e., the number of parents living in the student’s home and their relationships to the child, and
2. parents’ involvement in their children’s schoolwork.

Consequently, the solution to improving educational outcomes begins at home, by strengthening marriage and promoting stable family formation and parental involvement.

Talking Points

- American taxpayers invest heavily in education, with annual public education spending totaling \$553 billion. However, such an investment does not necessarily translate into quality education.
- Social science research demonstrates a strong link between the intact family structure, parental involvement, and educational outcomes, from school readiness to college completion.
- However, the intact family has eroded dramatically over the last four decades with significant implications for children’s well-being. In 1960, nearly 90 percent of children lived in two-parent families, compared to below 70 percent in 2007. Similarly, unwed childbearing has increased from 5 percent in 1960 to nearly 40 percent in 2006.
- Consequently, family policy intersects critically with education policy. Strengthening marriage and promoting stable family formation as well as parental involvement could well lead to significant gains in student achievement and attainment.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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The Erosion of Family Stability in America

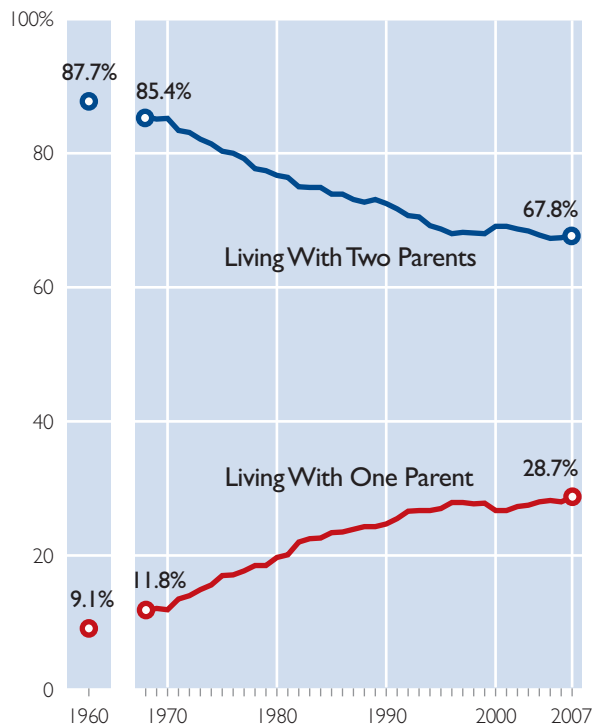
“Perhaps the most profound change in the American family over the past four decades,” writes sociologist Paul Amato, “has been the decline in the share of children growing up in households with biological parents.”⁵ In 1960, 88 percent of all children lived with two parents, compared to 68 percent in 2007.⁶ (See Chart 1.)

In 1960, 5 percent of all children were born to unmarried mothers. That figure rose to 38.5 percent in 2006.⁷ (See Chart 2.) Demographers have estimated that, overall, one child in two will

Two-Parent Families Are on the Decline

Since 1960, the percentage of children in the U.S. living with two parents has dropped almost 20 percentage points.

Percentage of Children Living With Two Parents and With One Parent, 1960 and 1968–2007

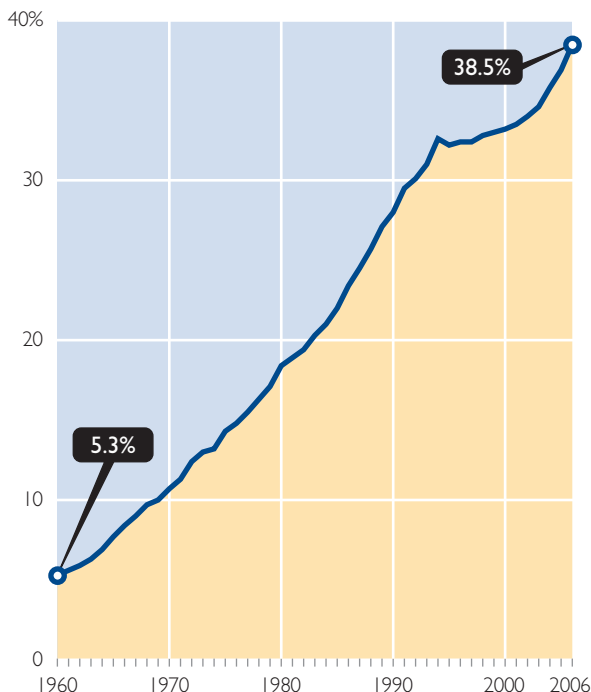


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Time Series, “Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present,” Table CH-1, at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ch1.xls> (July 31, 2008).

Chart 1 • B 2185 heritage.org

Unwed Childbirths Continue to Climb

Percentage of Children Born to Unmarried Mothers, 1960–2006



Sources: Data for 1940–1999, S. J. Ventura and C. A. Bachrach, “Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940–99,” National Vital Statistics Reports (NVSR), Vol. 48, No. 16 (2000) Tables 1 and 4; data for 2000, S. J. Ventura, J. A. Martin, S. C. Curtin, et al., “Births: Final Data for 1999,” NVSR, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2001), Table 17; data for 2001, J. A. Martin, B. E. Hamilton, S. J. Ventura, et al., “Births: Final Data for 2001,” NVSR, Vol. 50, No. 5 (2002), Table 19; data for 2002, J. A. Martin, B. E. Hamilton, S. J. Ventura, et al., “Births: Final Data for 2002,” NVSR, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2003), Table 19; data for 2003, J. A. Martin, B. E. Hamilton, P. D. Sutton, et al., “Births: Final Data for 2002,” NVSR, Vol. 52, No. 10 (2004), Table 17; data for 2004, J. A. Martin, B. E. Hamilton, P. D. Sutton, et al., “Births: Final Data for 2003,” NVSR, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2005), Table 17; data for 2005, J. A. Martin, E. H. Brady, P. D. Sutton, et al., “Births: Final Data for 2005,” NVSR, Vol. 56, No. 6 (2007), Table 18; and data for 2006, E. H. Brady, J. A. Martin and S. J. Ventura, “Births: Preliminary Data for 2006,” NVSR, Vol. 56, No. 7 (2007), Table 1.

Chart 2 • B 2185 heritage.org

1. National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2007*, Tables 25 and 26, at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables_1.asp (September 1, 2008).
2. *Ibid.*, Table 171; Dan Lips, “A Nation Still at Risk: The Case for Federalism and School Choice,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2125, April 18, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2125.cfm>.

spend some portion of his or her childhood in a single-parent family.⁸

Studies show that children raised in intact families, i.e., with two continuously married parents, tend to fare better on a number of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes than children living in other family forms.⁹ Not surprisingly, the changes in family structure over the last 40 years have affected child and adolescent well-being. In 2002, nearly 7 million children between the ages of 12 and 18 repeated a grade. Based on this figure, Professor Amato estimates that if the share of two-parent families had remained unchanged between 1980 and 2002, some 300,000 fewer teens would have repeated a grade. Some 750,000 fewer students in 2002 would have repeated a grade if the share of two-parent families remained at the level it was in 1960.¹⁰ (See Table 1.)

Social science research over the past decades suggests that family structure affects children's school outcomes, from preschool to college.¹¹

The Benefits of Two-Parent Families

Two-parent households offer greater family stability for children and reduce the number of behavior problems. The table below shows estimates of how many fewer instances of behavioral problems children would have faced in 2002 had the proportion of families with two parents been the same as the proportions in 1980, 1970, and 1960.

Problem	Estimated Instances in 2002	Estimated Change from 2002 Figure, Based on Share of Two-Parent Families in 1980, 1970, and 1960		
		1980	1970	1960
Repeated grade	6,948,530	-299,968	-643,264	-746,587
Suspended from school	8,570,096	-485,164	-1,040,410	-1,207,523
Delinquency	11,632,086	-216,498	-464,269	-538,841
Violence	11,490,072	-211,282	-453,083	-525,857
Therapy	3,412,678	-247,799	-531,392	-616,745
Smoked in last month	5,083,513	-239,974	-514,611	-597,269
Thought of suicide	3,692,358	-83,469	-178,995	-207,746
Attempted suicide	636,164	-28,693	-61,530	-71,413

Source: Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 2005), Table 2; estimates were based on the National Study of Adolescent Health, 1995.

Table 1 • B 2185  heritage.org

Some of the variations in school performance could be explained, in part or in whole, by the differences in family resources such as time and money, family

- Christopher B. Swanson, "Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation," Education Research Center, April 1, 2008, at http://www.americaspromise.org/uploadedFiles/AmericasPromiseAlliance/Dropout_Crisis/SWANSONCitiesInCrisis040108.pdf (September 1, 2008).
- Eric Hanushek, "Assessing the Effects of School Resources on Student Performance: An Update," *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer 1997), pp. 141–164; Jay P. Greene *et al.*, *Education Myths* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 7–20.
- Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 2005), p. 76.
- U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Time Series, "Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to the Present," Table CH-1, at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ch1.xls> (July 31, 2008).
- S. J. Ventura and C. A. Bachrach, "Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940-99," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 48, No. 16 (2000), Table 1; E. H. Brady, J. A. Martin, and S. J. Ventura, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2006," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 56, No. 7 (2007), Table 1.
- Larry L. Bumpass and James A. Sweet, "Children's Experience in Single-Parent Families: Implications of Cohabitation and Marital Transition," *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 21, No. 6 (November–December 1989), pp. 256–260.
- Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change."
- Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.
- For a comprehensive review of the academic literature see Barbara Schneider, Allison Atteberry, and Ann Owens, "Family Matters: Family Structure and Child Outcomes," Alabama Policy Institute, June 2005, at <http://www.alabamapolicy.org/pdf/currentfamilystructure.pdf> (September 1, 2008).

dynamics and parental characteristics that are associated with the various family forms. These are mediating factors, or mechanisms through which family structure affects schooling outcomes. Family structure may also exert a direct influence, independent of mediating factors. Thus, depending on the outcome, family structure's total effect may consist of one or more mediating influences or a combination of both direct and mediating influences.¹²

Though various methodological research issues—e.g., data quality, inconsistent definitions of family structure, the selection effect (e.g., are individuals who possess better parenting qualities more likely to choose marriage and stay married, or does marriage *per se* bolster children's well-being?)—limit the findings, the evidence, nonetheless, is strong: Family structure matters.¹³

School Readiness. A number of early-childhood outcomes contribute to children's eventual school readiness. The evidence suggests that potentially important early-childhood outcomes vary by family structure. One study, analyzing 1,370 mothers in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study who were continuously married or in cohabiting relationships from the child's birth to age three, found that three-year-olds born to cohabiting mothers tended to exhibit more aggressive, withdrawn, and anxious or depressive behavior than children born

to married mothers.¹⁴ For aggressive and withdrawn behaviors, the association was explained by income differences. For anxiety and depressive symptoms, even controlling for income, the cohabitation effect remained.

Studies show that reading to young children aids their literacy development. Toddlers and preschool-age children in married-parent families are read to more often than peers in non-intact families.¹⁵ One study of 11,500 kindergartners living with two parents or parent figures reported that, accounting for parental education and income, children living with married parents averaged higher reading achievement test scores than peers living in cohabiting or stepparent families.¹⁶

Elementary and Secondary Education. The research on family structure and elementary and secondary educational outcome is extensive.¹⁷ Studies have reported that:

- First-graders whose mothers were married when they were born are less likely to engage in disruptive behavior with peers and teachers than those whose mothers were single or cohabiting at the time of their birth.¹⁸
- Children aged three to 12 who live in intact families have higher average math scores than peers whose mothers live in cohabiting relationships.¹⁹

12. For a thorough discussion of the "family structure effect" and its mediating factors, see Norval Glenn and Thomas Sylvester, "The Denial: Downplaying the Consequences of Family Structure for Children," The Institute for American Values, March 30, 2006, at <http://www.familyscholarslibrary.org/assets/pdf/thedenial.pdf> (September 1, 2008).

13. Center for Marriage and Families, Institute for American Values, "Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes," *Research Brief* No. 1, November 2005, at <http://www.americanvalues.org/pdfs/researchbrief1.pdf> (September 1, 2008). This paper highlights some of the key findings from Schneider, Atteberry, and Owens, "Family Matters."

14. Cynthia Osborne, Sara McLanahan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gun, "Young Children's Behavioral Problems in Married and Cohabiting Families," Center for Research on Child Wellbeing *Working Paper* No. 03-09-FF, September 2004, at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP03-09-FF-Osborne.pdf> (September 1, 2008).

15. U.S. Census Bureau, "A Child's Day, 2004," Table D9, at http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/well-being/2004_detailedtables/04tabD09.xls (September 1, 2008).

16. Julie Artis, "Maternal Cohabitation and Child Well-Being Among Kindergarten Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 69 (February 2007), pp. 222–236.

17. For more detailed descriptions of the findings, see "Strong Beginnings: How Families Bolster Early Educational Outcomes," FamilyFacts.org, *Top Ten Findings*, April 2008, at http://www.familyfacts.org/topten/topten_0804.cfm (September 1, 2008).

18. Shannon E. Cavanagh and Aletha C. Houston, "Family Instability and Children's Early Problem Behavior," *Social Forces*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (September 2006), pp. 551–581.

19. Sandra L. Hofferth, "Residential Father Family Type and Child Well-Being," *Demography*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (February 2006), pp. 53–77.

- The association between family structure and nine-year-olds' science and math achievement appears to be cross-national.²⁰
 - Children aged seven to 10 who live in continuously intact families tend to score higher on reading tests than peers who have lived in other family structures.²¹
 - Children aged six to 11 who live in intact families tend to be more engaged in their schoolwork than peers in other family structures.²²
 - Eighth-graders in two-parent families perform, on average, better on math and science tests than peers in single-parent or stepparent families.²³
 - The predominant family structure of a school's student population appears to be linked to the individual science and math scores of eighth-graders.²⁴
 - Ninth-graders whose mothers were married when they were born are more likely to complete an algebra course than are peers whose mothers were single when they were born.²⁵
 - Middle school and high school students who experience a parental divorce tend to suffer declines in their grade point averages and are more likely to fail a course one year later compared to peers of married parents; the evidence suggests a causal link.²⁶
 - Among middle school and high school students, the portion of childhood spent in a single-parent family is associated with declines in GPAs over time; and living in a single-mother family with a cohabiting partner is associated with a greater likelihood of suspension or expulsion from school at a later time.²⁷
- Finally, studies have also shown a robust link between family structure and high school dropout or graduation rates, and the evidence suggests that the relationship may be causal.²⁸

Higher Education and Educational Attainment.

The impact of family structure on educational outcomes appears to last into young adulthood. Throughout the college entrance process, students from non-intact families tend to fall behind their

20. Suet-Ling Pong and Gillian Hampden-Thompson, "Family Policies and Children's School Achievement in Single- Versus Two-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 65 (August 2003), pp. 681–699.
21. Marcia J. Carlson and Mary E. Corcoran, "Family Structure and Children's Behavioral and Cognitive Outcomes," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (August 2001), pp. 779–792.
22. Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (May 2004), pp. 351–367.
23. Suet-Ling Pong, "Family Structure, School Context, and Eighth-Grade Math and Reading Achievement," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 59 (August 1997), pp. 734–746.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Shannon E. Cavanagh, Kathryn S. Schiller, and Catherin Riegle-Crumb, "Marital Transitions, Parenting and Schooling: Exploring the Link Between Family Structure History and Adolescents' Academic Status," *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 79 (October 2006), pp. 329–354.
26. Michelle L. Frisco, Chandra Muller, and Kenneth Frank, "Parents' Union Dissolution and Adolescents' School Performance: Comparing Methodological Approaches," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 69 (August 2007), pp. 721–741.
27. Holly E. Heard, "Fathers, Mothers, and Family Structure: Family Trajectories, Parent Gender, and Adolescent Schooling," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 69 (May 2007), pp. 435–450.
28. Nan Marie Astone and Sara S. McLanahan, "Family Structure, Parental Practices and High School Completion," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (June 1991), pp. 309–320; Charles F. Manski, Gary D. Sandefur, and Daniel Powers, "Alternative Estimates of the Effect of Family Structure During Adolescence on High School Graduation," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, Vol. 87, No. 417 (March 1992), pp. 25–38; Gary D. Sandefur, Sara McLanahan, and Roger A. Wojtkiewicz, "The Effects of Parental Marital Status during Adolescence on High School Graduation," *Social Forces*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (September 1992), pp. 103–1212; Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Scott Boggess, "Family Structure, Economic Status, and Educational Attainment," *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 11 (1998), pp. 205–222; Gary Painter and David I. Levine, "Family Structure and Youths' Outcomes," *The Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (January 2000), pp. 524–549; Timothy J. Biblarz and Greg Gottainer, "Family Structure and Children's Success: A Comparison of Widowed and Divorced Single-Mother Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 62 (May 2000), pp. 533–548.

peers from intact families. The gap increases when the process involves selective college admission.²⁹ Overall, children from intact families complete more years of schooling and achieve higher educational attainment than do peers from other family forms.³⁰

One study, analyzing two nationally representative data sources, reported that longer durations in single-parent or blended families during childhood appear to have a negative impact on college attendance and graduation. Though family income and parental education explained the association between single-parent families and lower college attendance and graduation rates, the disparities in these outcomes between children in intact families and those in blended families persisted.³¹

Similarly, another study showed that, accounting for family income and estimated financial aid, an average student from a non-intact family was 5 percent less likely to attend a four-year college and 6 percent less likely to graduate from college than an average student from an intact family.³²

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement emerges as another robust influence on educational outcomes. It is multidimensional. Examples include monitoring children's activities outside home and school; setting rules; having conversations about and helping children with school work and school-related issues; holding high educational expectations; discussing future planning with children and helping them

with important decision making; participating in school-related activities such as meeting with teachers and volunteering in the classroom; and reading to children or engaging in other enrichment or leisure activities together.

A meta-analysis of 77 studies, consisting of 300,000 elementary and secondary students, found that parental educational expectations are a particularly important aspect of parental involvement.³³ Parenting style, reading to children, and, to a lesser extent, participation in school-related activities appeared to be influential as well. Furthermore, parental involvement is associated with multiple measures of student achievement, for the entire student population as well as for minority and low-income student populations. Overall, "the academic advantage for those parents who were highly involved in their education averaged about 0.5–0.6 of a standard deviation for overall educational outcomes, grades and academic achievement."³⁴

Parental Involvement and Family Structure.

The level of parental involvement varies by family structure, and the relationship between parental involvement and educational outcomes depends on the family context as well.³⁵ One study, for example, found that compared to high school students from intact families, those from single- or step-parent families reported less parental involvement in their school work, supervision, and parental educational expectations, which, in turn, affected school outcomes.³⁶

29. Dean Lillard and Jennifer Gerner, "Getting to the Ivy League: How Family Composition Affects College Choice," *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 70, No. 6 (November–December 1999), pp. 706–730.

30. Gary D. Sandefur and Thomas Wells, "Does Family Structure Really Influence Educational Attainment?" *Social Science Research*, Vol. 28 (1999), pp. 331–357; Timothy J. Biblarz and Adrian E. Raftery, "Family Structure, Educational Attainment, and Socioeconomic Success: Rethinking the 'Pathology of Matriarchy,'" *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (September 1999), pp. 321–365.

31. Donna K. Ginther and Robert A. Pollak, "Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes: Blended Families, Stylized Facts, and Descriptive Regressions," *Demography*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (November 2004), pp. 671–696.

32. Michele Ver Ploeg, "Children from Disrupted Families as Adults: Family Structure, College Attendance and College Completion," *Economics of Education Review*, Vol. 21 (2002), pp. 171–184.

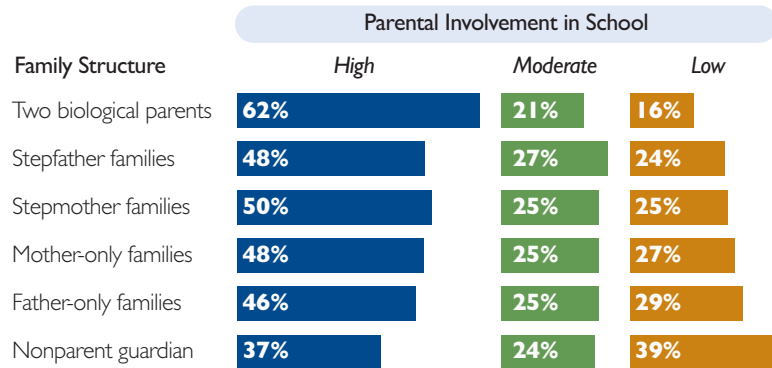
33. William H. Jeynes, "Parental Involvement and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis," Harvard Family Research Project, *Family Involvement Research Digests*, December 2005, at <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/parental-involvement-and-student-achievement-a-meta-analysis> (September 1, 2008).

34. *Ibid.*

35. Christine Winquist Nord and Jerry West, "Fathers' and Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools by Family Type and Resident Status," National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, May 2001.

Two-Parent Families Are More Involved in Education

Children living in families with two biological parents are more likely to receive a higher level of parental school involvement than in any other family structure.



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Source: Christine Winquist Nord and Jerry West, "Fathers' and Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools by Family Type and Resident Status," National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, May 2001, Figure 1.

Chart 3 • B 2185  heritage.org

Early Childhood.³⁷ Studies show that a sensitive, warm, and responsive type of parenting and engaging in play activities with young children bolster their social and emotional development, communication skills, and ability to focus.³⁸ Doing arts and crafts with children, reading to them, showing them how to write words, and using a more complicated vocabulary around them also aid their literacy and language development.³⁹ One study reported a link between these types of parental engagement and a range of school readiness outcomes such as "children's motivation to learn, attention, task persistence, and receptive vocabulary and...fewer conduct problems."⁴⁰

Frequent contact between parents and their children's preschools as well

36. Nan Marie Astone and Sara McLanahan, "Family Structure, Parental Practices and High School Completion," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (June 1991), pp. 309–320.
37. This section cites a number of studies and findings as summarized in Heather B. Weiss, Margaret Caspe, and M. Elena Lopez, "Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education," Harvard Family Research Project, No. 1, Spring 2006, at <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/family-involvement-in-early-childhood-education> (September 1, 2008).
38. C. M. Connell and R. J. Prinz, "The Impact of Childcare and Parent-Child Interactions on School Readiness and Social Skills Development for Low-Income African American Children," *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2002), pp. 177–193; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network, "Early Child Care and Self-Control, Compliance and Problem Behavior at Twenty-Four and Thirty-Six Months," *Child Development*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (1998), pp. 1145–1170; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network, "Multiple Pathways to Early Academic Achievement," *Harvard Education Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (2004), pp. 1–28; F. Lamb-Parker, A. Y. Boak, K. W. Griffin, *et al.*, "Parent-Child Relationship, Home Learning Environment and School Readiness," *School Psychology Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1999), pp. 413–425; V. G. Paley, *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); J. Fantuzzo and C. McWayne, "The Relationship Between Peer-Play Interactions in the Family Context and Dimensions of School Readiness for Low-Income Preschool Children," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2002), pp. 79–87.
39. C. W. Nord, J. Lennon, and B. Liu, *et al.*, "Home Literacy Activities and Signs of Children's Emerging Literacy, 1993 and 1999," National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; M. H. Haney and J. Hill, "Relationships Between Parent-Teaching Activities and Emergent Literacy in Preschool Children," *Early Child Development and Care*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2004), pp. 215–228; P. R. Britto and J. Brooks-Gunn, "Beyond Shared Book Reading: Dimensions of Home Literacy and Low-Income African American Preschoolers' Skills," in J. Brooks-Gunn and P. R. Britto, eds., *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development: Vol. 29. The Role of Family Literacy in Environments in Promoting Young Children's Emerging Literacy Skills* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. 73–93; P. O. Tabors, K. A. Roach, and C. E. Snow, "Home Language and Literacy Environment: Final Results," in D. K. Dickinson and P. O. Tabors, eds., *Beginning Literacy with Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Paul Brookes Publishing, 2001), pp. 11–138; M. E. Leibhaman, J. M. Alexander, K. E. Johnson, *et al.*, "Parenting Behaviors Associated with the Maintenance of Preschoolers' Interests: A Prospective Longitudinal Study," *Applied Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2005), pp. 387–414; John Fantuzzo, Christine McWayne, and Marlo A. Perry, *et al.*, "Multiple Dimensions of Family Involvement and Their Relations to Behavioral and Learning Competencies for Urban, Low-Income Children," *School Psychology Review*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2004), pp. 467–480.

as parent participation in school-related activities, such as volunteering in the classroom or meeting with a teacher, appear to benefit children on a number of dimensions, including classroom performance and social interaction with peers and adults.⁴¹ One study reported that children whose teachers perceived more parental involvement tended to exhibit fewer problems and higher language and math competencies compared to children whose teachers perceived less parental engagement.⁴² The evidence also suggests that parental school involvement's positive influences buffer against some of the negative effects of poverty.⁴³

Elementary Education.⁴⁴ Parental involvement during elementary school affects children's schooling outcomes as well. The quality of the parent-child relationship is significant. Middle school students who received sensitive, supportive parenting from their mothers during kindergarten tend to per-

form better in school.⁴⁵ Children of parents who frequently praise and show affection to them are less likely to require classroom attention for behavior and socio-emotional issues.⁴⁶

Studies also show that parental involvement in school-related activities during elementary school is associated with long-term educational gains. One study reported that among low-income African-American families, children of highly involved parents during elementary school were more likely to graduate from high school. In the same study, children of parents who were involved in school-related activities for three or more years completed more years of schooling compared to peers of less involved parents.⁴⁷ Involvement, specifically by fathers, is significant as well. Children of fathers who visit their classrooms and meet with teachers tend to fare better in school than peers whose mothers are the only involved parent.⁴⁸

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40. John Fantuzzo, Christine McWayne, and Marlo A. Perry, *et al.*, "Multiple Dimensions of Family Involvement," p. 467.
41. R. Marcon, "Positive Relationships Between Parent School Involvement and Public School Inner-City Preschoolers' Development and Academic Performance," *School Psychology Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1999), pp. 395-412; J. T. Downer and J. L. Mendez, "African American Father Involvement and Preschool Children's School Readiness," *Early Education and Development*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2005), pp. 317-340; C. V. Izzo, R. P. Weissberg, W. J. Kasprout *et al.*, "A Longitudinal Assessment of Teacher Perceptions of Parent Involvement in Children's Education and School Performance," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (1999), pp. 817-839; C. McWayne, C. Hampton, and V. Fantuzzo, *et al.*, "A Multivariate Examination of Parental Involvement and the Social and Academic Competencies of Urban Kindergarten Children," *Psychology in the School*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2004), pp. 363-377.
42. S. E. Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. Pianta, and R. C. Cox, *et al.*, "Teacher-Rated Family Involvement and Children's Social and Academic Outcomes in Kindergarten," *Early Education and Development*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2003, pp. 179-200.
43. W. M. Barnard, "Parental Involvement in Elementary School and Educational Attainment," *Children & Youth Services Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2004), pp. 39-62; M. A. Clements, A. Reynolds, and E. Hickey, "Site-Level Predictors of Children's School and Social Competence in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 19 (2004), pp. 273-296; E. Graue, M. A. Clements, and R. J. Reynolds, *et al.*, "More Than Teacher Directed or Child Initiated: Preschool Curriculum Type, Parent Involvement and Children's Outcomes in the Child Parent Centers," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 12, No. 72 (2004), pp. 1-38; W. T. Miedel and A. J. Reynolds, "Parental Involvement in Early Intervention for Disadvantaged Children: Does it Matter?" *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1999), pp. 379-402.
44. This section cites a number of the studies and findings as summarized in Margaret Caspe, M. Elena Lopez, and Cassandra Wolos, "Family Involvement in Elementary School Children's Education," Harvard Family Research Project, No. 2 (Winter 2006/Spring 2007), at <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/family-involvement-in-elementary-school-children-s-education> (September 1, 2008).
45. E. F. Morrison, S. Rimm-Kaufman, and R. Pianta, "A Longitudinal Study of Mother-Child Interaction at School Entry and Social and Academic Outcomes in Middle School," *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 41, 2003, pp. 185-200.
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47. Barnard, "Parental Involvement in Elementary School and Educational Attainment."
48. B. A. McBride, S. J. Schoppe-Sullivan, and H. Moon-Ho, "The Mediating Role of Fathers' School Involvement on Student Achievement," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2005), pp. 201-216.

Reading with children and the way in which parents read to their children affect children's reading ability.⁴⁹ The research shows a distinction between reading storybooks to children, which contributes to their literacy development, and teaching children to read and write, which aids their language development. Both types of activities affect third- and fourth-grade performance.⁵⁰ Furthermore, parents' use of vocabulary and their attitude toward homework appear to influence corresponding outcomes in their children.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, children of parents who provide appropriate help with their homework tend to fare better in school.⁵²

The home environment in which children are raised plays a role in schooling outcomes. For example, in a study of middle-class families, elementary students whose parents offered them math and

science learning materials showed greater inclination toward and interest in math and science activities.⁵³ Finally, parental expectations of achievement, particularly adolescents' perceptions of such expectations, appear to strengthen their actual motivation and ability in school.⁵⁴

Secondary Education.⁵⁵ Parent-child relationship quality continues to be an effective factor in schooling outcomes throughout adolescence.⁵⁶ For example, in one study, youths who felt bonded to their parents and enjoyed good communication with them tended to have higher grades and physical well-being.⁵⁷ In another study, among low-income youths, those whose parents encouraged individual decision making in their children during early adolescence were more likely to graduate from high school and attend college.⁵⁸ Beyond academics,

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49. L. Baker, K. Mackler, and S. Sonnenschein, *et al.*, "Parents' Interactions with Their First-Grade Children During Storybook Reading and Relations with Subsequent Home Reading Activity and Reading Achievement," *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2001), pp. 415–438.
50. Chad Nye, Herb Turner, and Jamie Schwartz, "Approaches to Parental Involvement for Improving the Academic Performance of Elementary School Age Children," Campbell Collaboration, 2006, at http://www.sfi.dk/graphics/Campbell/reviews/parental_involvement_review.pdf (September 1, 2008); M. Senechal and J. A. LeFevre, "Parental Involvement in the Development of Children's Reading Skill: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study," *Child Development*, Vol. 73 (2002), pp. 445–460.
51. Z. Weizman and C. S. Snow, "Lexical Input as Related to Children's Vocabulary Acquisition: Effects of Sophisticated Exposure and Support for Meaning," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2001), pp. 265–279; H. Cooper, K. Jackson, and B. Nye, *et al.*, "A Model of Homework's Influence on the Performance Evaluations of Elementary School Students," *Journal of Experimental Education*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (2001), pp. 181–200.
52. K. V. Hoover-Dempsey, A. Battiato, and J. M. Walker, *et al.*, "Parental Involvement in Homework," *Educational Psychologist*, Vol. 36 (2001), pp. 195–210; Joan M. T. Walker, Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey, Darlene R. Whetsel, and Christa L. Green, "Parental Involvement in Homework: A Review of Current Research and Its Implications for Teachers, After School Program Staff, and Parent Leaders," Harvard Family Research Project, October 2004, at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/homework.html> (September 1, 2008).
53. J. E. Jacobs and M. M. Bleeker, "Girls' and Boys' Developing Interests in Math and Science: Do Parents Matter?" *New Direction for Child and Adolescent Development*, Vol. 106 (2004), pp. 5–21.
54. G. J. Marchant, S. E. Paulson, and B. A. Rothlisberg, "Relations of Middle School Students' Perceptions of Family and School Contexts with Academic Achievement," *Psychology in the Schools*, Vol. 38 (2001), pp. 505–519.
55. This section cites a number of studies and findings as summarized in Holly Kreider, Margaret Caspe, Susan Kennedy, and Heather Weiss, "Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education," Harvard Family Research Project, Vol. 3 (Spring 2007), at <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/family-involvement-in-middle-and-high-school-students-education> (September 1, 2008).
56. J. Mandara, "The Impact of Family Functioning on African American Male's Academic Achievement: A Review and Clarification of the Empirical Literature," *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (2006), pp. 206–223; K. A. Moore, L. Guzman, and E. Hair, *et al.*, "Parent-Teen Relationships and Interactions: Far More Positive Than Not," *Child Trends*, 2004; A. R. Simpson, "Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action," Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 2001; L. Steinberg, B. Bradford, and S. Dornbusch, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need To Do* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); L. Steinberg, S. D. Lamborn, and S. M. Dornbusch, *et al.*, "Impact of Parenting Practices on Adolescent Achievement: Authoritative Parenting, School Involvement, and Encouraging to Succeed," *Child Development*, Vol. 63 (1992), pp. 1266–1281.

teens who receive more support from their parents are more likely to participate in structured after-school activities, which, in turn, are positively correlated with achievement and social competence.⁵⁹

During adolescence, parental monitoring to the extent to which parents know their children's activities outside of home and school, plays a crucial role in adolescent outcomes, particularly when children and adolescents perceive genuine care from their parents.⁶⁰ Parental monitoring is associated with fewer school problems, less substance use, and reduced delinquency. Moreover, parental monitoring is positively linked to social development, school grades, and school engagement, such as paying attention in class and being motivated to do well in school.⁶¹ The evidence also suggests that parental monitoring may have different effects on boys and girls.⁶²

Not only does parental involvement in their children's school-related activities send a positive mes-

sage to students and teachers, such involvement is also related to high school completion.⁶³ The research also suggests that minority students benefit from their parents' participation in formal leadership roles at the school district level.⁶⁴ The effects of parental involvement, however, may vary by parents' education. One study showed that involvement from more-educated parents was associated with fewer behavioral problems in students, which, in turn, affected achievement and aspirations. Among students whose parents are less educated, parental involvement was related to student aspirations but not achievement.⁶⁵

At the secondary education level, high parental expectations continue to yield significant schooling benefits.⁶⁶ In one study of high school seniors, "parental expectations for achievement stand out as the most significant influences on [their] achievement growth, high school credits completed, and enrollment in extracurricular academic high school

57. S. Pong, L. Hao, and E. Gardner, "The Roles of Parenting Styles and Social Capital in the School Performance of Immigrant Asian and Hispanic Adolescents," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (2005), pp. 928–950; B. Soenens, M. Vansteenkiste, and K. Luyckx, *et al.*, "Parenting and Adolescent Problem Behavior: An Integrated Model with Adolescent Self-Disclosure and Perceived Parental Knowledge as Intervening Variables," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2005), pp. 305–318.
58. H. R. Tenenbaum, M. V. Porche, and C. E. Snow, *et al.*, "Maternal and Child Predictors of Low-Income Children's Educational Attainment," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2007), pp. 227–238.
59. Christopher Wimer, Sandra Denise Simpkins, and Eric Dearing, *et al.*, "Predicting Youth Out-of-School Time Participation: Multiple Risks and Developmental Differences," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (April 2008), pp. 179–207.
60. C. Spera, "Adolescents' Perceptions of Parental Goals, Practices and Styles in Relation to Their Motivation and Achievement," *Journal of Early Adolescence*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2006), pp. 456–490.
61. J. L. Rodriguez, "Family Environment and Achievement among Three Generations of Mexican American High School Students," *Applied Developmental Science*, Vol. 6 (2002), pp. 88–94; A. R. Simpson, *Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action* (Boston: Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 2001); B. Soenens, M. Vansteenkiste, and K. Luyckx, *et al.*, "Parenting and Adolescent Problem Behavior," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (March 2006), 305–318; B. Rankin and J. M. Quane, "Social Contexts and Urban Adolescent Outcomes: The Interrelated Effects of Neighborhoods, Families, and Peers on African-American Youth," *Social Problems*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2002), pp. 79–100; B. G. Simons-Morton and A. D. Crump, "Association of Parental Involvement and Social Competence with School Adjustment and Engagement among Sixth Graders," *Journal of School Health*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (2003), pp. 121–126.
62. W. H. Jeynes, "Effects of Parent Involvement and Family Structure on the Academic Achievement of Adolescents," *Marriage & Family Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2005), pp. 99–116.
63. L. Steinberg, B. Bradford, and S. Dornbusch, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996); R. P. V. Anguiano, "Families and Schools: The Effect of Parental Involvement on High School Completion," *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003), pp. 61–85.
64. M. Marschall, "Parent Involvement and Educational Outcomes for Latino Students," *Review of Policy Research*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (2006), pp. 1053–1076.
65. N. E. Hill, D. R. Castellino, and J. E. Lansford, *et al.*, "Parent Academic Involvement as Related to School Behavior, Achievement, and Aspirations: Demographic Variations across Adolescence," *Child Development*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (2004), pp. 1491–1509.

programs.”⁶⁷ High parental educational expectations are also associated with math and reading scores, interest in school, academic self-discipline, future planning, and motivation for school work.⁶⁸ In one study of African-American families, when parents taught that success originates from effort rather than surpassing peers, their expectations had a strong effect on eighth- and ninth-grade math grades.⁶⁹ Overall, parental expectations appear more influential than peer effects.⁷⁰

Finally, discussions with parents about the future and pursuing further education support teens’ aspirations and college preparation.⁷¹ One study of high-achievement Latino college students found that their parents imparted strong encouragement and values that emphasized education as a means to escape poverty.⁷²

Policy Implications

Social science research over the last few decades indicates a strong relationship between family structure, parental involvement and children’s educa-

tional outcomes, with enduring influences from early childhood to young adulthood. The empirical evidence points to several policy implications:

- Family policy intersects critically with education policy. Fortifying the intact family structure may lead to improvements in individual student outcomes as well as the American education system as a whole.
- Policies that strengthen healthy marriage and stable family formation may bolster child well-being, including school outcomes, both at the individual and aggregate levels.
- Conversely, policies and laws that facilitate further family breakdown may have adverse impacts on children’s educational outcomes and provide additional stress on the education system.
- In education reform efforts, greater emphasis on parental involvement and parental choice could yield significant gains in student achievement and attainment. Importantly, the research shows consistent benefits of high parental involvement

66. L. P. Toney, M. L. Kelley, and N. F. Lanclos, “Self- and Parental Monitoring of Homework in Adolescents: Comparative Effects on Parents’ Perceptions of Homework Behavior Problems,” *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2003), pp. 35–51; M. Zhan, “Assets, Parental Expectations and Involvement, and Children’s Educational Performance,” *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 28 (2006), pp. 961–975; S. Catsambis, “Expanding Knowledge of Parental Involvement in Children’s Secondary Education: Connections with High School Seniors’ Academic Success,” *Social Psychology of Education*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2006), pp. 149–177; W. H. Jaynes, “A Meta-Analysis: The Effects of Parental Involvement on Minority Children’s Academic Achievement,” *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2003), pp. 202–218; J. Trusty, “Modeling Mexican Americans’ Educational Expectations: Longitudinal Effects of Variables Across Adolescence,” *Journal of Adolescent Research*, Vol. 18 (2003), pp. 131–153.
67. Catsambis, “Expanding Knowledge of Parental Involvement in Children’s Secondary Education,” as summarized in Kreider, Caspe, and Kennedy, *et al.*, “Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students’ Education,” p. 4.
68. Zhan, “Assets, Parental Expectations and Involvement, and Children’s Educational Performance”; C. Spera, “Adolescents’ Perceptions of Parental Goals, Practices and Styles in Relation to Their Motivation and Achievement,” *Journal of Early Adolescence*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2006), pp. 456–490; G. J. Marchant, S. E. Paulson, and B. A. Rothlisberg, “Relations of Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Family and School Contexts with Academic Achievement,” *Psychology in the Schools*, Vol. 38 (2001), pp. 505–519.
69. L. M. Gutman, “How Student and Parent Goal Orientations and Classroom Goal Structures Influence the Math Achievement of African Americans During the High School Transition,” *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, Vol. 31 (2005), pp. 44–63.
70. T. Sands and S. W. Plunkett, “A New Scale to Measure Adolescent Reports of Academic Support by Mothers, Fathers, Teachers and Friends in Latino Immigrant Families,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005), pp. 244–253.
71. Catsambis, “Expanding Knowledge of Parental Involvement in Children’s Secondary Education”; G. P. McCarron and K. K. Inkelas, “The Gap between Educational Aspirations and Attainment for First-Generation College Students and the Role of Parental Involvement,” *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (2006), pp. 534–549; Trusty, “Modeling Mexican Americans’ Educational Expectations.”
72. R. Ceballos, “From Barrios to Yale: The Role of Parenting Strategies in Latino Families,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2004), pp. 171–186; P. Gándara, *Over the Ivy Walls: The Educational Mobility of Low-Income Chicanos* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2005).

for minority and low-income students, which deserves serious consideration in light of the achievement gap.

- On the other hand, education initiatives that disregard the importance of families and parental involvement, instead focusing on strategies such as increased expenditures, are likely to continue to prove less effective or ineffective altogether.

Conclusion

American taxpayers invest heavily in education, with annual public education spending totaling \$553 billion. The average annual expenditure per child enrolled in a public school amounts to \$9,266. Though per-pupil expenditures have increased dramatically over the past few decades, student achievement has remained relatively flat. A significant portion of students attending public schools score

“below basic” in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In some of the most disadvantaged central cities in America, fewer than half of high school students graduate.

While numerous education reforms over the last quarter century have demonstrated little impact on overall student achievement,⁷³ the research clearly shows that the intact family structure and strong parental involvement are significantly correlated with educational outcomes, from school readiness to college completion. Instead of favoring proven ineffective education policies, policymakers seeking effective education reform should consider policies that strengthen family structure in America and bolster parental involvement and choice in education.

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73. See Lips, “A Nation Still at Risk.”