

# PRINCIPALS' DIGESTS

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Leadership

Volume 23 Number 47

## PARENT INVOLVEMENT THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Parents are important to their children's academic success. But researchers disagree about the *type* of parent involvement that is most helpful. Is it helping with homework? Reading to children? Engaging children in home learning activities? Teaching social skills? Communicating with teachers? Attending meetings and events at the school? Being involved in school decision-making?

**None of these is what really makes the difference.** Traditional measures of parental involvement fail to capture the fundamental ways in which parents actually help their children academically.

So what *does* boost student achievement?

### STAGE-SETTING

According to new research, it's *stage-setting*. The analogy is to what a theatre's behind-the-scenes workers do so actors can perform successfully in the show. A good performance can be characterised as a partnership between two critical components: (1) the actor embodying his or her role, and (2) the stage-setter creating and maintaining an environment that reinforces (or does not compromise) the actor's embodiment of the role.

This is how many parents construct and manage the social environment around their children in a manner that creates the conditions in which academic success is possible.

### HOW IT WORKS

**The most effective parents set the stage for their children's academic success by the *life space* and *messages* they orchestrate.**

**They provide a secure home and neighbourhood environment so children**



don't

have to worry about food and shelter and getting to and from school safely.

**They make strenuous efforts to get their children into good schools.**

**They are supportive of academics**, but also of non-school activities like ballet or piano lessons.

**Their support comes across as caring about children's overall success**, not pressure. This can be conveyed indirectly by a desk rather than a TV in a child's bedroom, and lots of books and magazines in the home.

**They convey the critical importance of academic achievement** to future options and life success.

**They show confidence in the child's intelligence and ability to do well in school**, fostering a positive academic identity and a sense of responsibility to not let the family down.

All this produces a strong academic self-concept in young people. The best outcome is both a strong academic and general self-concept.

**The big point is that it is parents' stage-setting, not being involved in school activities, that makes the difference.**





**Certainly, parents can be helpfully involved in their children's schooling.**

However, stage-setting aims can also be achieved without any traditional forms of involvement. Thus, a busy parent with a demanding career can be a successful stage-setter with minimal direct involvement in his or her child's schooling. This parent's influence is at work under the surface, subtly shaping the children's self-concept, aspirations and future possibilities.

#### **THE EFFECT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS**

**In more affluent communities, a variety of factors make it easier for parents to set the stage for academic success. In poorer communities, the opposite is true:** weaker neighbourhood institutions and public services, fewer tertiary-educated adults in the home and neighbourhood, less access to museums and other enriching experiences. In addition, over the course of a year a majority of the poorest families experience at least one of the following deprivations: eviction, crowded housing, disconnection of utilities, no stove, no refrigerator or housing with upkeep problems. These conditions inhibit the development of educational skills, depress school achievement, and discourage teachers.

**Studies show that parents of all SES levels have high hopes for their children's school success.** What matters is how those hopes play out day to day.

#### **FOUR POSSIBILITIES:**

**Parents don't convey the importance of education** and don't provide an educationally supportive home environment and this usually produces low achievers.

**Parents convey the importance of education** but don't create an educationally supportive home environment and this usually produces mediocre or average achievers.

**Parents don't convey the importance of education**, but there is an educationally supportive home environment and this usually produces average achieving students.

**Parents convey the importance of education and create an educationally supportive home environment** and this usually produces solid high achievers. **Clearly some parents succeed in making these messages more central to their children's life, thereby broadening children's horizons, enriching their minds, and setting them up for academic success.**

The major conclusion is that stage-setting explains a greater share of the link between social class and achievement than traditional forms of parental involvement.

Affluent parents are often more involved than their less-advantaged counterparts. The relationship between parent involvement and high achievement is often too appealing to ignore and thus parental involvement is promoted as the answer to problems in schools.

**Rather than pushing parents to be more involved in traditional school-based activities, educators should help parents understand and shape the factors that truly make a difference in their children's academic success – messages about academics and certain home conditions.**

By providing high-quality classroom experiences for all students, schools can affect academic achievement independent from the life space parents create in the home.

Acknowledgement: "A New Framework for Understanding Parental Involvement: Setting the Stage for Academic Success" by Angel Harris and Keith Robinson, *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, September 2016