
Evidence of the Effectiveness of Complementary Learning

by Heather Weiss
Harvard Family Research Project

In this era of accountability and transparent performance data, the limits of school approaches alone, particularly for disadvantaged children, are clear. Learning that occurs beyond the school door—at home and in the community—can complement and extend what children learn in school. When families are involved in children’s learning, no matter what their income or background, they have a positive influence on student social and academic outcomes. Family involvement in education holds promise for fostering academic achievement and healthy development among children. To facilitate family involvement, schools and communities can draw from exemplary practices listed in this article.

Current school reform efforts are largely focused within the K–12 school system, but this is beginning to change. More communities are looking beyond the school for complementary learning activities and support to help improve school and student performance. This is the case for several reasons. In this era of accountability and transparent performance data, the limits of school approaches alone, particularly for disadvantaged children, are clear. The evidence about the performance payoffs of investments in complementary learning opportunities and resources—such as preschool, after school, and summer school programs and efforts to promote parent involvement in learning at home and school—is slowly accumulating.

To broaden the debate about how to increase school and student performance to include complementary learning, the Family Research Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HFRP) collects and disseminates the evidence about its effectiveness through its website and periodic publications. It also tracks and posts the related work of other researchers and organizations. The materials that follow present current evidence about the ways family involvement in education and out-of-school time programs support children’s development and achievement.

Research Examining the Benefits of Family Involvement in Education

Learning that occurs beyond the school door—at home and in the community—can complement and extend what children learn in school. When families are involved in children’s learning, no matter what their income or background, they have a positive influence on student social and academic outcomes.¹ Some consistent research findings about family involvement processes suggest their significance for children’s learning and development.

- ❖ Parent values and expectations are associated with children’s motivation to learn as well as their academic achievement.^{2,3} Beneficial values can take the form of high but realistic educational aspirations and expectations, a focus on effort rather than ability, and the value placed on specific subject matter.
- ❖ Parent behaviors around learning activities such as reading, conversations about school-related matters, and visiting the public library are correlated with improvements in children’s reading comprehension.^{4,5}
- ❖ Parent participation in school—in the form of attending conferences and class events, and volunteering—also supports student achievement. Such involvement is associated with students’ getting high grades; enjoying school; avoiding grade repetition, suspension, and expulsion; and participating in extracurricular activities.^{6,7}
- ❖ Parent engagement through community organizing brings about school policy changes and delivers new resources to under-resourced schools.⁸ These changes create the school conditions that enhance student achievement.⁹

Family involvement in education holds promise for fostering academic achievement and healthy development among children. To facilitate family involvement, schools and communities can draw from exemplary practices, such as:

- ❖ Schools that facilitate family involvement by providing transportation, child care, translation services, flexible meeting times, and parent resource libraries.¹⁰
- ❖ Community collaboratives of social service agencies and schools that provide social support to parents.^{11, 12}
- ❖ Projects that train and involve parents to become parent leaders and facilitators for other parents’ learning.^{13, 14}
- ❖ Community organizing that engages families to focus on school performance and accountability.¹⁵

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Heather Weiss is the founder and director of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She also founded and facilitates the Home Visit Forum, a group of six national home visit programs who work together to carry out research to strengthen home visitation. She has written on the history of home visitation and strategies for evaluating early childhood programs. She and her colleagues produce the *Evaluation Exchange*, a national publication devoted to improving evaluation practice. Dr. Weiss has an Ed.D. in Education and Social Policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She writes, speaks, and advises on child and family policy, family support programs and systems, evaluating out-of-school time programs, and on innovative evaluation strategies. She is a consultant and advisor to numerous foundations on evaluation strategies and on early childhood, youth, and family initiatives.