Article Review


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The No Child Left Behind Act and other educational reform efforts seek to increase parent involvement as one strategy for improving student achievement. However, several research studies have revealed that the benefits of parental participation depend on the dynamics of the interaction. This article explores the factors that influence the effect of parent involvement, specifically parental style, child perceptions, and the reason for involvement.

Parent involvement is categorized as school-based (activities that occur at the school) or home-based (interactions that take place outside the school). Either type of involvement can focus on increasing the child’s skills or motivation, both of which are important for academic success.

In general, longitudinal studies indicate that school-based involvement such as conferences with teachers, volunteer work, and attendance at school functions have a positive effect on children’s grades, literacy skills, and math understanding. The findings are consistent across socioeconomic status and parent education. However, the research on home-based interactions is less definitive. Library visits and other intellectual activities seem to be related to high grades and academic performance, while parental assistance with homework can have a negative or low effect on student performance.

The How of Parental Involvement

One factor that can affect the impact of parental involvement on student achievement is the method used by parents to support their children. The research indicates that parental involvement has the greatest influence when parents are autonomy supportive, process focused, have a positive affect, and/or maintain positive beliefs about their children.

Autonomy supportive parents let their child take the lead, rather than make decisions on behalf of their son or daughter. In addition, students are more successful when their parents emphasize the learning process and not the characteristics or abilities of the child to do the work. A positive, caring affect regarding school issues supports a child’s skill development and motivation more than a hostile and resentful attitude about school and homework. Finally, a child whose parents have positive views of his or her potential has a greater sense of competency.

These positive attributes are more likely to occur in school-based settings than at home when parents are assisting children with homework. Homework tasks can
result in a tendency by parents to be controlling as they emphasize the performance inherent in the assignment and try to counteract their child’s negative attitude about it. Mutual frustrations on the part of the child and the parents can also diminish positive beliefs about the student’s abilities.

The Whom of Parental Involvement

Longitudinal studies have found that the child’s competence experiences can moderate the effect of parental style. Children with negative perceptions of confidence had greater improvements in school performance when their parents used an autonomy supportive style of involvement than high-achieving children. Likewise, the negative effects of a controlling style of parent involvement were more significant for lower achieving students than students with positive self-perceptions. Controlling interactions actually resulted in decreased performance by students over a six month period.

The research also indicates that children with less confidence in their abilities also are more likely to benefit from a process-focused parent than children with more confidence. In fact, the gaps in confidence were closed over a six month period when parents were process focused and had a positive affect.

The Why of Parental Involvement

Most of the literature about parent involvement focuses on its impact on the academic achievement of students. However, parental interaction can also improve the emotional health of children, which is becoming a goal of education and social policy. Recent research suggests that emotional functioning can be strengthened by success in school and positive views of competency, characteristics that are enhanced by parental involvement. The few studies that have addressed the impact of parental school involvement on children’s emotional functioning found a link between parent participation in school activities and higher self-esteem in adolescents, as well as the emotional regulation of elementary and middle school students. Furthermore, the autonomy-supportive style of mothers resulted in a reduction in depressive symptoms and external pressure for perfection.

The research also indicates that the positive parent-child relationships that occur with parent involvement improve child behavior and social skills. Children with involved parents are more likely to be classroom leaders and have positive interactions with their peers. One study found a reduction in behavior problems up to one year after quality parent involvement, as rated by the teacher.

Implications for Research and Intervention

The studies highlighted in this article reveal a need to further explore the quality and characteristics of parent involvement in addition to the extent or frequency of
participation. Areas for investigation include the dimensions of involvement beyond autonomy, process orientation, and positive affect; forms of school-based and home-based involvement; measures of involvement; and the characteristics of children that influence their relationships with their parents. In addition, research should examine the impact of parent involvement on emotional functioning, as well as moral development and civic awareness.

Future interventions should apply the findings of the research about the dynamics of parent involvement to programs intended to improve student achievement. Emphasis should be placed on autonomy supportive interactions, process-focused activities, positive affect, and positive beliefs about children’s abilities. However, parents should not feel that they are being judged by their child’s performance or they may begin to exert more control and emphasize the end-result, rather than the process of learning.

Research and interventions in these areas will help to deepen understanding about the role of parents in their child’s academic and social success.