

Tying Education To Future Goals May Boost Grades More Than Helping With Homework

ScienceDaily (May 21, 2009) — Helping middle school students with their homework may not be the best way to get them on the honor roll. But telling them how important academic performance is to their future job prospects and providing specific strategies to study and learn might clinch the grades, according to a research review.

"Instilling the value of education and linking school work to future goals is what this age group needs to excel in school, more than parents' helping with homework or showing up at school," said lead researcher Nancy E. Hill, PhD, of Harvard University. She examined 50 studies with more than 50,000 students over a 26-year period looking at what kinds of parent involvement helped children's academic achievement.

"Middle school is the time when grades and interest in school decline," said Hill. "Entering puberty, hanging out with friends, wanting distance from parents and longing to make one's own decisions win over listening to parents and studying." But adolescence is also a time when analytic thinking, problem-solving, planning and decision-making skills start to increase, Hill said. At this age, "teens are starting to internalize goals, beliefs and motivations and use these to make decisions. Although they may want to make their own decisions, they need guidance from parents to help provide the link between school and their aspirations for future work."

This type of parental involvement works for middle school students because it is not dependent on teacher relationships, like in elementary school. Middle school students have different teachers for each subject so it is much more difficult for parents to develop relationships with teachers and to influence their teenagers through their teachers, Hill said.

Parents' involvement in school events still had a positive effect on adolescents' achievement, Hill said, but not as much as parents' conveying the importance of academic performance, relating educational goals to occupational aspirations and discussing learning strategies.

Helping with homework had mixed results. Some students felt that parents were interfering with their independence or putting too much pressure on them. Some found that their parents' help was confusing because they didn't use the same strategies as their teachers. Still others felt that parents helped them complete or understand their homework, said Hill and co-author Diana F. Tyson, PhD, of Duke University.

Another possible explanation for the negative return on homework, said Hill, "was that those students who needed help with their homework were already doing poorly in school and this showed up as being associated with lower levels of achievement."

The review did not rule out ethnic and socioeconomic influences. Findings showed no difference between whites and blacks in which types of parental involvements influenced achievement but the same interventions did not necessarily produce the same results for Hispanics and Asian-Americans. Some of the studies showed that parental involvement had different meanings across different ethnic groups, which could be the result of differences in economic resources.

"Lack of guidance is the chief reason that academically able students do not go to college," said Hill. "So communicating the value of education and offering curriculum advice about what to focus on helps these students plan their long-term goals."