Home-school partnerships: What parents and whānau can contribute

Research shows that parental involvement supports children to develop important motivational characteristics linked to higher achievement. Certain family actions and behaviours related to their child’s education and learning are correlated with a significant impact on achievement, although the research is not always conclusive as to causative factors. Parents can contribute to home-school partnerships by maintaining positive home-school communications, being involved at school, participating in home learning opportunities initiated by the school and by families, communicating parental values and aspirations, and engaging in positive parenting behaviours.

Positive communication with school

Parents can contribute to home-school partnerships by participating in regular, positive, two-way communication with schools and teachers. When there are greater interconnections in the contexts of children’s lives, there is a greater impact on social, emotional and academic learning. It is thought that greater consistency between the messages students receive from home and from school leads to greater internalisation on the part of the students, and translates into greater motivation and engagement. Positive communication between parents and teachers is shown to lead to improved classroom behaviour, better reading performance and overall achievement. Students also indicate that, where there is a home-based consequence to bad behaviour at school, they are more likely to work on improving their behaviour.

Family involvement at school

Parents and families can contribute to home-school partnerships through their involvement in activities at school, such as visiting the classroom, volunteering in school activities, and attending parent evenings or concerts. This is one of the most visibly identifiable forms of whānau contribution to home-school partnerships, and implies parental affirmation and support of the school, its activities and staff. Research has found that parental involvement at school, particularly in activities focused on learning, is shown to be related to children scoring higher in measures of mathematics, literacy, communication, perseverance and fine motor skills. In particular, research has found that parents’ goal-oriented and subject specific involvement is most successful in improving student outcomes. In addition, parents volunteering and participating in school activities, and attending teacher-parent conferences, is related to students’ greater achievement and enjoyment of school, greater social competence, fewer behavioural issues, and self-regulation skills.

However, some research suggests that certain forms of parental involvement at school do not lead to any increase in parents’ expectations or involvement in educational activities at home. For example, the presence of a Parent-Teacher Association [PTA] is not found to be related to effectiveness of schools, nor is being part of the PTA or being a school trustee found to make a significant difference to children's achievement. School-based involvement in middle years schooling, mostly based on attendance at school functions, has a weak relation to academic outcomes. Indeed, research in the USA suggests that it is only activities related to learning at home (homework involving family interactions, and the provision of learning resources and environments) that are consistently correlated to increased student achievement.
School-initiated home learning opportunities

Research reports greater motivation and engagement in students whose parents reinforce and support academic work at home. When school-aligned activities are carried out in the home, students feel more capable of mastering academic work at school, take more responsibility for their learning, and have improved self-efficacy. In particular, research indicates that:

- Providing parents with educational resources (such as books) and pedagogical knowledge, and encouraging families to incorporate school-like activities into family activities, has a dramatic and positive effect on achievement.

- Parental involvement in students’ homework supports students’ attention, effort and concentration, especially when parents focus on using communication to encourage, support and praise their children’s efforts, and when they organise their homework schedules, provide extra reading, writing or maths problems, and encourage their children to set and work on goals.

However, not all parental involvement is supportive. Students whose parents provide a great deal of help with homework are less likely to achieve academic success than their peers whose parents provided less extensive support. Parents may lack the necessary understanding to properly assist children with homework, and may supply incorrect strategies or information, or even give answers rather than help their children to learn to work it out. Teachers report that students whose parents are very controlling of homework show less initiative, persistence, or autonomy in school work. Similarly, while praise and encouragement on the part of the parents is linked to intrinsic motivation, parents that provide extrinsic rewards for students’ achievement results encourage students to develop an extrinsic motivational orientation, leading to lower motivation and less persistence and satisfaction in completing school work.

Family-initiated home learning opportunities

Some research shows that it is regular home activities related to learning but not initiated by the school that are most important. After the child’s age, the factor that is found to have the strongest effect on cognitive development is the home learning environment. Rich home learning environments that include positive and warm contact and interaction with extended family members, meaningful and varied language, and literacy and mathematical experiences are also associated with higher achievement. Providing support for children’s academic and vocational aspirations, conveying the value of learning, having pedagogical discussions and problem-solving, and showing how learning connects to outside interests and current events, strongly predict achievement, much more so than other, more direct types of parental involvement such as developing skills or giving academic assistance. Certain activities are shown to be particularly effective, such as:

- Reading to and with children, singing songs and rhymes, participating in creative activities, and going on trips and play dates, which are associated with increased confidence, cooperation, conformity, sociability and lower anxiety as well as higher achievement scores.

- Playing board and counting games, which is associated with students’ stronger numeracy skills.

However, some research finds that the impact on achievement of specific parental involvement behaviours is affected by the amount of warmth the parent shows the child. Where there is low warmth towards the child, what are usually helpful parental involvement activities have instead been negatively associated with reading and mathematics achievement. This finding suggests that the most important form of family influence on learning and achievement is the parent’s relationship with the child.
Parental values and aspirations

It is important for parents to hold high expectations about their children’s learning and achievement, because parents’ beliefs about their children’s educational futures and their interest in their children’s education are found to predict their actual achievement. It is thought that parental expectations shape students’ aspirations and expectations, as well as their motivation and performance. Parents with high expectations show enthusiasm for education and school work, and convey to their child that school and school-related activities are important and worthwhile.

However, families with high expectations are usually the same families who become more involved in their children’s schooling and provide a range of educationally beneficial activities and supports at home, and it could be these latter actions that are most important. In addition, families of both high and low achieving students are found to value and emphasise education, suggesting that valuing school in itself is not enough. And because parental aspirations can increase because of children’s high achievement, the link between aspirations and achievement may not be a causal factor.

Nevertheless, when parents and whānau are involved in school-based activities and learning, students perceive this to demonstrate the family’s continued expectation of good academic performance, believe that their family is making an effort to support that performance, and are more likely to try hard to achieve. Students whose parents discuss students’ career or adult-life plans with them are also more positively oriented to school than students’ whose parents do not discuss students’ future plans with them.

Positive parenting behaviours

Parenting is strongly linked to children’s behaviour and academic competence at school. Parent-child interactions in the home are a strong influence on children’s cognitive development, and parent interactional style seems to be more important than the extent to which parents are involved in school. An authoritative parenting style, which is controlling and demanding (as opposed to permissive) but also warm and responsive to children and sets clear guidelines, limits and appropriate expectations for them, is positively associated with academic achievement, positive attitudes towards school, self-reliance and self-regulation. This parenting style encourages children’s self-determination and autonomy, and encourages students to see themselves as responsible for their own outcomes. It is contrasted with permissive parenting (which is non-controlling and non-demanding) and authoritarian parenting (which is detached, less warm, and controlling).

Studies of father engagement show both the quality of parenting interactions (warmth and responsiveness as opposed to punitiveness) and the quantity of engagement activities predict children’s social and academic success. Furthermore, parenting style and parent enthusiasm for education are found to predict students’ reading achievement to a greater extent than parental involvement. Adolescents who experience authoritative parenting have greater achievement, higher self-esteem, as well as less depression, anxiety and antisocial behaviour.

In conclusion, there are a number of valuable ways that parent and whānau actions and behaviours can contribute to home-school partnerships, and schools can support parents to do so.
Further Reading


References


