

Family Involvement Makes a Difference

Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education

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Introduction

Adolescence is a time of rapid change. In adolescence (ages 11–17), youth experience puberty, develop abstract thinking abilities, and transition into and out of middle school and then high school. Although most youth go through this period without excessive stress, adolescents are at a greater risk of school drop out, arrest, drug use, and some psychological disorders than other age groups. To be successful in school and in life, adolescents¹ need trusting and caring relationships. They also need opportunities to form their own identities, engage in autonomous self-expression, and take part in challenging experiences that will develop their competence and self-esteem.² Adolescents desire autonomy, independence, and time with peers, but at the same time, they continue to rely on guidance from parents and other adults.³

As this brief will describe, family involvement in academics and learning remains important in the adolescent years. Unfortunately, family involvement in education tends to decrease across middle and secondary school, due in part to adolescents' increasing desire for autonomy and in part to changes in school structure and organization. Yet family involvement in education remains a powerful predictor of various adolescent outcomes.⁴ Perhaps most importantly, family involvement relates to higher rates of college enrollment. It is generally accepted that young people today need a postsecondary degree to earn a middle-class wage. Although certain programs have succeeded in preparing youth to transition directly from high school to employment, on the whole few institutional supports exist to help adolescents succeed on this trajectory in U.S. society.⁵

Unfortunately, a college education is not attained easily by all youth. Too many low-income, ethnic minority, and immigrant students are falling behind their more economically advantaged peers when it comes to enrolling in college courses.⁶

National studies show that many high school graduates lack the reading skills they need to do well in the university setting, and even fewer are prepared for postsecondary-level science and math courses.⁷ Just as early childhood and elementary school educators recognize that schools and early childhood programs alone cannot prepare students for academic success without the support of families, educators in middle and high schools, as well as practitioners in programs that serve young adults, must acknowledge that families play a critical role in helping youth succeed in high school and beyond.

So, what do effective involvement processes look like in secondary school, and how do they occur? This research brief summarizes the latest evidence base on effective family involvement in middle and high school. As the third and final report in our series on how family involvement matters across the developmental continuum, this brief synthesizes research studies that link family involvement in middle and high school to youth's academic and social outcomes. It also profiles programs that have been evaluated to show what works to promote family involvement and student achievement during this critical developmental period. The brief concludes with implications for policy, practice, and research.

Family Involvement Processes in Adolescence

A large body of research supports the importance of family involvement in the middle and high school years, and intervention evaluations increasingly demonstrate that family involvement can be strengthened with positive results for youth and their school success. Such results can be achieved when there is a match among youth's developmental needs, parents' attitudes and practices, and schools' expectations and support of family involvement.⁸ Three family involvement processes for creating this match emerge from the evidence base:

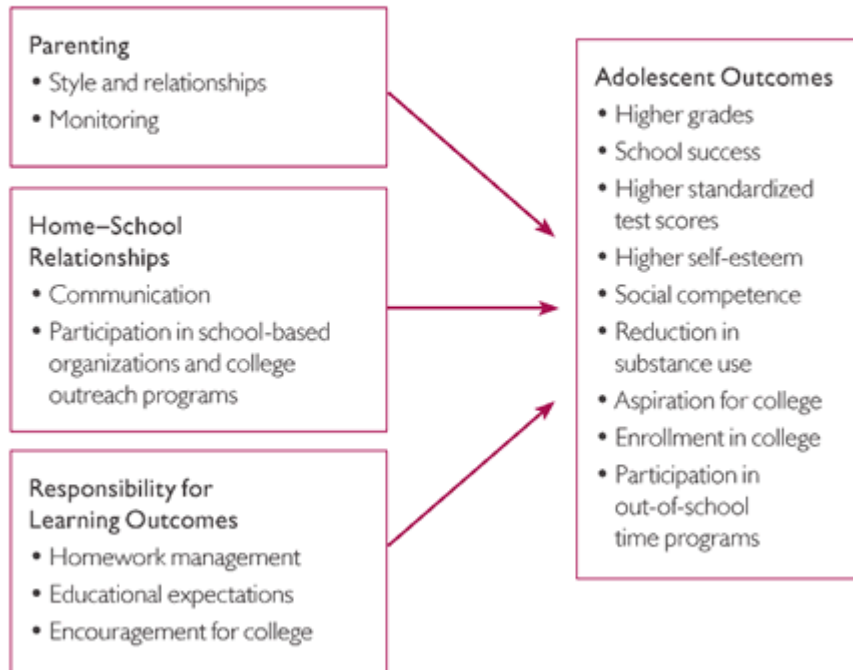
- *Parenting* consists of the attitudes, values, and practices of parents in raising youth.
- *Home–school relationships* are the formal and informal connections between the family and secondary school.
- *Responsibility for learning* is the aspect of parenting that places emphasis on activities in the home and community that promote youth's social and academic growth.

These three family involvement processes are the same as those that are related to academic and social-emotional outcomes in the early childhood and elementary school years. However, the nature of these processes shifts from those of earlier periods. Parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes need to become more respectful of adolescents' drive for independence, expanding cognitive abilities, and widening social networks.

As noted in the earlier briefs, although the three processes described above provide a framework in which to organize the research, family involvement includes other processes beyond those described in this series. For example, parent leadership, community organizing, and participation in school decision making are not represented in this review. This is not because these forms of family involvement lack value. Instead, their omission reflects the fact that there does not yet exist a great deal of empirical research linking these activities to youth's outcomes. This review focuses deliberately on those processes that have been shown empirically to relate to academic and social outcomes for students ([see the Community Organizing text box for an](#)

[exception](#)). The sources of this research brief come primarily from the field of human development and psychology. A detailed explanation of the methods for this brief can be found in [Appendix I](#).

Figure 1.
Processes of family involvement and adolescent outcomes



Parenting of Adolescents

Parenting is the family involvement process that consists of parents' attitudes, values, and practices in raising youth. The parenting styles used to engage youth, the quality of parent–youth relationships, and the ways parents monitor youth behavior collectively and uniquely influence adolescent achievement.

Parenting style and parent–youth relationships. Warm, responsive parenting in adolescence is related to school success and positive social and emotional outcomes.¹³ Adolescents with supportive parents exhibit higher rates of self-reliance, identity formation, school performance, and positive career-planning aspirations, as well as lower rates of depression and delinquency.¹⁴ Youth who share trusting relationships with their parents—characterized by mutual and sustained bonds and open communication—have higher grade point averages (GPAs) and better physical health and are more likely to disclose information to their parents that will keep them out of trouble.¹⁵ Adolescents benefit when these supportive and mature relationships with parents begin in the middle school years. In one study of low-income students, the degree to which mothers emotionally enabled and encouraged autonomous decision making in everyday conversations with their 11-year-old children predicted whether children dropped out or completed high school and enrolled in college 7 years later.¹⁶

Emotional responsiveness is one component of parenting style—which also includes

how parents use discipline and control to interact with and rear their children. Different parenting styles are associated with different patterns of adolescent development. Many studies suggest that an authoritative style, which is responsive, warm, and firm but democratic, is associated with more positive educational outcomes than an authoritarian style, which is characterized by strictness and unilateral parental decision making.¹⁷ However, recent research shows that parenting styles and their impact differ among ethnic groups.¹⁸ These variations are due to a confluence of factors, including cultural traditions and norms and contextual variables. For example, strict limit-setting and monitoring might be more adaptive for families living in high-crime neighborhoods and facing racial discrimination.¹⁹

The nature of the parent–youth relationship is not only important for individual student outcomes such as academic achievement, but also for participation in out-of-school time activities that can benefit youth academically, socially, and emotionally. For example, when adolescents feel more supported by their families and their families are more engaged in a variety of youth contexts, youth are more likely to sign up for and stay involved in structured out-of-school time activities (e.g., after school programs, band, team sports, student government, etc.) that are linked to academic and social benefits. In contrast, adolescents with disengaged or restrictive parents are less likely to participate in out-of-school time activities. Disengaged parents are unlikely to be involved in their children's schools and unlikely to manage their children's time use, while restrictive parents set many rules but do not generally provide academic or other forms of support. Unfortunately, adolescents of restrictive parents are less likely to have enriching home environments and would likely benefit from organized out-of-school time activities the most.²⁰

Monitoring. Monitoring represents a parent's—or another close adult's—attempts to know what is going on in an adolescent's life. Monitoring of social activities, such as being aware of an adolescent's whereabouts, decreases school problems, substance use and delinquency, and promotes social competence and good grades.²¹ By monitoring adolescents' academic and social lives, parents can prevent emerging problems from becoming big ones, foster identity achievement, and promote academic growth.²² Parental monitoring is also linked with youth's prosocial competency, fewer problem behaviors, and school adjustment and engagement; the latter refers to whether or not students pay attention in class, take school seriously, and want to do well in school.²³ Parental monitoring is most effective for academic motivation and achievement when adolescents perceive their parents as truly invested in their well-being and caring about them.²⁴ However, the effect of parental monitoring might differ for girls and boys. For at-risk inner-city boys, school engagement was greater when parental monitoring was high, but for girls, school engagement depended on both high parental monitoring and high family cohesion.²⁵

Complementary Learning

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) believes that for children and youth to be successful from birth through adolescence, there must be an array of learning supports around them. These learning supports include families, early childhood programs, schools, out-of-school time programs and activities, higher education, health and social service agencies, businesses, libraries, museums, and other community-based institutions. HFRP calls this network of supports *complementary learning*. Complementary learning is characterized by discrete linkages that work together to encourage consistent learning and developmental outcomes for children

and youth. These linkages should be continuously in place from birth through adolescence, but the composition and functions of the network will change over time as children mature.

Family Involvement Makes a Difference is a series of research briefs that examines one set of complementary learning linkages: family involvement in education at home and school. As the third in the series, this brief focuses on the linkages between families and middle and high schools. The two previous papers investigated family involvement in early childhood and elementary school settings. Taken together, these briefs make the case that family involvement predicts academic achievement and social development as children progress from early childhood programs through K–12 schools and into higher education or postsecondary settings.

For more information about complementary learning and HFRP's other projects, see this resource box or visit www.hfrp.org. To learn more about this series of publications, email fine@gse.harvard.edu. To be notified when future HFRP publications become available, subscribe to our e-news email at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/subscribe.html.

Home–School Relationships

Home–school relationships are the formal and informal connections between the family and school. Home–school relationships seem to be just as important for youth as they are for younger children. Although home–school relationships tend to wane during or even before children reach adolescence, such relationships continue to play an important role in youth outcomes. Aspects of home–school relationships include communicating with teachers and school personnel, attending school events, volunteering at school, and participating in parent–teacher organizations and leadership groups. The extent to which parents attend and volunteer at school functions, for example, has a consistent positive impact on adolescent academic achievement.²⁸ Moreover, when parents, especially those from diverse ethnic backgrounds, are involved on formal leadership committees, youth benefit. For example, higher levels of Latino parent representation on Local School Councils in Chicago was associated with a substantial increase in the number of Latino youth meeting academic standards.²⁹

There are several reasons why home–school relationships matter in middle and high school. Involvement and presence at school helps parents monitor their youth's academic and social progress, acquire information they need to make decisions about their children's academic future, and foster positive relationships with school staff.³⁰ Home–school relationships also increase student achievement by conveying to both teachers and students parents' beliefs about the importance of education and appropriate behaviors for adults in society.³¹ In addition, when families of diverse backgrounds are involved at the school level, teachers become more aware of cultural and community issues and, in turn, become more likely to engage and reach out to parents in meaningful and effective ways.³²

Home–school relationships are also linked to various student achievement outcomes beyond grades, including adjustment across transitions and students' educational expectations for themselves.³³ For example, parents' frequent contact with school personnel and involvement in school policies and parent–teacher organizations are positively related to students completing high school.³⁴ Youth also make successful

transitions from middle to high school when parents monitor their progress, evaluate that information, and intervene by actively communicating with teachers.[35](#)

However, as in earlier periods of development, family involvement in adolescence may function differently and serve different purposes depending on parents' levels of education and ethnicity. In one longitudinal study, when parents with higher levels of education were involved, youth exhibited fewer behavior problems, which, in turn, was associated with achievement and aspirations. By contrast, when parents with lower levels of education were involved, family involvement was related to student aspirations for success but not achievement. Moreover, in the same study, family involvement was more strongly related to achievement for African Americans than European Americans. The authors conjectured that this may be because relationships between teachers and African American parents may counteract negative stereotypes teachers may have about African American students.[36](#)

Last, unique to the middle and high school years, parents' participation in school or community sponsored college-outreach programs also supports adolescent learning and development by influencing students' postgraduation plans. This is particularly true for low-income, minority, and immigrant youth. For example, when parents attend meetings at the school that provide basic information about college entrance processes, SAT preparation, financial aid, and course placements, parents begin to imagine their children as college students, feel more comfortable in the school environment, and build support groups with other parents to scaffold their children's college preparation.[37](#) Such participation may also increase parents' familiarity with college preparation requirements and engage them in navigating the school and college application system; youth whose parents possess these qualities are more likely to graduate high school and attend college.[38](#)

Organizing for Adolescent Achievement

One innovative way to improve academic outcomes for adolescents is community organizing by both youth and parents. Youth organizing capitalizes on adolescents' improved perspective-taking, moral reasoning, cognitive and social development, and emerging sense of social justice. Through youth organizing, parents and their children form partnerships with one another and others in the community to address school-related problems. Although relatively little data has been collected on the impact of community organizing initiatives on student achievement, research and evaluation on community organizing show that these initiatives can influence a number of factors that explain student achievement. Therefore, we have included this sidebar to highlight some emerging outcomes of evaluated youth and family organizing movements, including:

- *Opportunities for youth to develop relationships with their families for community causes.* Mothers on the Move, for example, provides time for mothers, grandmothers, and youth to get involved together in the community. Parents and youth jointly organize rallies and demonstrate for school improvement. Involvement in this group gives parents opportunities to meet with school and district officials as consultants. At the same time, youth develop the critical inquiry skills that help them better assess structural inequalities in their educational settings.[9](#)
- *Expansion of youth research skills.* Youth activists involved in Youth United for Change and the Philadelphia Student Union receive training in

quantitative and qualitative research methods from their respective programs.¹⁰ In a recent campaign, these youth activists investigated the quality of family involvement in a variety of urban high schools. Their research revealed that parents want to be involved but often face barriers to doing so. The final report concluded with a series of recommendations for the Philadelphia school district including the need for the district to (a) give parents larger decision-making roles in schools; (b) offer professional development on respectful family involvement; (c) seek input from parents on how they would like to be treated; (d) reduce class size, so that teachers and staff can get to know students and families better; and (e) reduce teachers' class loads, so that they have more time to communicate with parents.¹¹

- *Increases in parent engagement at the high school level.* Through an innovative high school and university partnership, a Boston College-based team of professors and graduate students held graduate-level teacher preparation courses onsite at a local urban Boston high school. The parent organizing component of the course focused on increasing parent attendance at Parents' Night. The graduate students enrolled in the course led a group of high school teachers in developing relationships with parents through telephone calls. The Parents' Night planning group also developed brochures advertising the event and translated them into different languages. The initiative was successful, and attendance at Parents' Night increased by 59 percent from the prior year.¹²

Read more about community organizing for school reform more generally at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/lopez.html.

Responsibility for Learning Outcomes

In adolescence, responsibility for learning is an aspect of parenting that places emphasis on homework management, educational expectations, and encouragement for college.

Homework management. Parents are less likely to be directly involved in the homework content of middle and high school students as compared to younger children. Nonetheless, parental encouragement and concrete help in managing homework supports adolescents' learning, helping them to complete homework more accurately, so that when they study on their own, they can do so with fewer problem behaviors. Such help can also decrease conflict over homework and raise grades.⁴¹ The benefits of parental management of homework holds true for low-income, urban minority, and rural European American youth.⁴² However, the association between involvement and achievement can be bidirectional, such that student behavior problems and poor achievement can also prompt high levels of involvement generally and time spent helping with homework specifically because of the needs of the students.⁴³

Educational expectations. High parental expectations also improve student outcomes.⁴⁵ For instance, parental expectations for students' success and high expectations for achievement stand out as the most significant influences on high school seniors' achievement growth, high school credits completed, and enrollment in extracurricular academic high school programs.⁴⁶ High maternal expectations for educational achievement are directly associated with higher student math and reading scores.⁴⁷ When adolescents perceive that their parents have high educational goals, they have

more interest in school, greater academic self-regulation, and higher goal pursuits.⁴⁸ There is evidence that African American parents' expectations have an even greater effect on 8th and 9th graders math grades when parents also communicate to their young adolescents that academic success is defined by effort, rather than by a desire to outperform others.⁴⁹

One explanation for why this aspect of responsibility for learning is so important is that parents' aspirations and expectations affect student aspirations and expectations of themselves, and this, in turn, affects students' achievement.⁵⁰ For example, when students perceive that their parents value education, they are also more likely to feel competent and motivated in their schoolwork.⁵¹ In fact, the academic encouragement parents provide is even more powerful than the support provided by friends.⁵² The extent to which parents convey and communicate these expectations is important. The more families discuss school issues, the more of a positive impact their expectations can have on adolescent academic achievement.⁵³ High mathematical expectations along with general discussions in the home about school progress, future plans for college, homework, and school problems in grades 9, 10, and 11 are the strongest predictors of adolescent participation in advanced mathematics courses in high school.⁵⁴

High parental expectations also play a mediating role between risk factors and student achievement. For example, high expectations appear to shield low-income Latino youth from the risks associated with attending low-performing urban schools. In one study, parents of high achieving Latino youth emphasized the value of education, provided literacy-rich environments, and offered nonverbal expressions of support for academic work.⁵⁵ They frequently asked their children about their school projects and allowed them to turn to other adults in the community, especially teachers, as role models.⁵⁶ Such academic encouragement by Latino parents is associated directly with youth staying in school and indirectly with higher GPAs through higher rates of homework completion.⁵⁷

However, the effect of academic expectations might vary by gender. Mothers' and teachers' academic support were positively related to adolescent Latina girls' academic motivation, while fathers' and teachers' academic support were positively related to adolescent Latino boys' academic motivation.⁵⁸ Parents also often make economic sacrifices for their children's education such as encouraging students to stay in school instead of working to help support the family or by stopping migrant farm work because of the disruption this can cause for their children's education. These actions are understood by students (and sometimes teachers) as evidence of the high value parents place on education.⁵⁹

Encouragement for college. Parents' constant encouragement and discussions about school and higher education also promote students' college aspirations and preparation.⁶⁰ Parent discussions with youth about educational issues are associated with greater likelihood of enrolling in college, although the degree of benefit differs by ethnic/racial group as well as by immigration generational status.⁶¹ When parents encourage college enrollment and youth perceive parents' interest in their school success, youth sign up for academic tracks in high school associated with college access, participate in out-of-school time programs that may prepare students for college environments and develop aspirations to attend college.⁶² High achieving low-income Latino college students report that their parents provide them with encouragement and motivation, conveying the idea that valuing education was a "way out" of poverty.⁶³

Successful Programs for Parenting Adolescents

Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) is a family-focused program for children and adolescents at risk for behavior problems and their families. BSFT fosters parental leadership, parental involvement, family communication, and culturally sensitive parenting skills. BSFT is delivered in 8–12 weekly 1–1.5-hour sessions in which a counselor meets with a family either in the community, at the school, in the program office, or in the family's home. There are three components of BSFT: joining, in which the therapist “joins” the family by reflecting on parenting style, behavior, and interactions; diagnosis, in which the therapist identifies repetitive patterns of family interactions in terms of developmental appropriateness; and restructuring, in which the therapist promotes change-producing strategies that bolster more adaptive family functioning. Randomized experimental evaluations with Hispanic and African adolescents found that BSFT effectively reduces adolescent behavior problems, substance use, and association with antisocial peers.²⁶ In addition to improving adolescents' self-concept and self-control, the program develops more positive and effective parenting practices.²⁷

www.brief-strategic-family-therapy.com/bsft

Implications

This review demonstrates that the three family involvement processes of parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes are critical for middle and high school youth's academic achievement, social development, participation in settings other than school that promote healthy development, and opportunities for college enrollment. Accordingly, this review leads to several implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers as they endeavor to create systematic, developmental and comprehensive approaches to family involvement. These recommendations can advance the practice of family involvement and strengthen the linkages among high schools, community-based organizations, and families.

For policy

- *Invest in initiatives that engage families in college preparation.* The transition from high school to college is one of the most profound educational moments of adolescent development. Family involvement in the college preparation process, through high expectations and aspirations, encouragement, and participation in college outreach programs in the school and community, can help youth make the right decisions, so that they can successfully transition to postsecondary careers.

Indeed, two of the evaluated programs mentioned in this brief, the Puente Project and the Futures and Families Program, were part of the federal GEAR UP program designed to prepare low-income students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP (or Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is administered by the Office of Postsecondary Education and allows institutions of higher education and local and state education agencies to apply for discretionary grants to support programming that increases the number of low-income students prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP grantees serve an entire cohort of students beginning no later than the 7th grade and follow the

cohort through high school.

One critical set of services supported by this federal grant program is activities and information that foster parent involvement in promoting college education.⁶⁵ By offering these services beginning in the middle school years, GEAR UP ensures that parents are engaged in the college preparation process early and across the multiple school transitions that youth experience.

- *Advocate for small schools reform to promote family engagement in secondary school.* Our review suggests that frequent parent–teacher contact benefits students. Findings from a recent evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded small high schools in New York City suggest that small schools are one way to promote parent–teacher connections that in turn lead to educational success for youth.⁶⁶ Specifically, teachers at small schools are able to communicate with parents more frequently and provide parents with the information and knowledge they need to support their children in school.⁶⁷ In contrast, students in large, urban high schools are less likely to graduate, in part because their classroom environments are alienating and unresponsive to their needs. For these reasons, policymakers and funders in recent years have turned toward the creation of small schools, which divide larger schools into more manageable learning communities, as one promising avenue for high school reform.⁶⁸

Regardless of their size, middle schools and high schools can adopt some of these best practices and organize and structure teachers' class loads so that opportunities for this type of productive communication can occur.

- *Develop policies to help parents obtain the information they need to support their children's academic trajectories.* When parents have information regarding their children's academic progress and learning opportunities, youth have better chances for success. State, district, and local policymakers would be well served to create policies to ensure that parents have information to understand school and state educational regulations and evaluate the effectiveness of such programs. States, for example, can ensure that parents have access to information on colleges' entrance expectations. They can also assist parents and students in setting goals and choosing middle and high school courses, so that youth get on track for college early.

States can also require that parents be notified annually of whether a child is on track to graduate from high school and mandate that schools assist families and students with the transition from high school to college.⁶⁹ The states of Washington and Maryland, for example, require high schools, at the beginning of each school year, to provide students and parents with a copy of the graduation requirements. Tennessee passed legislation in 2005 requiring Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation to hold a lottery scholarship day every school year to inform high school students and their parents of financial assistance available from net lottery proceeds for attendance at eligible postsecondary institutions. However, very little is known about the effectiveness of these policies. For this reason, policymakers also can invest in their systematic evaluation.

Districts can also take on this charge by documenting and implementing policies for involving parents in the postsecondary planning process. This

includes—beginning in middle school—setting up infrastructure at the school and district level for involving parents in the selection of their children's courses and programs of study, establishing comprehensive programs to help parents understand assessment results and information, developing programs to explain the postsecondary planning process, and helping parents understand the various types of financial aid available for postsecondary education.[70](#)

- *Strengthen national clearinghouses and media campaigns that draw attention to effective family involvement processes.* Family involvement in education—defined as parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes—is just as important for older youth as it is for younger children. Policymakers and funders can strengthen access to informational resources, such as clearinghouses and evaluation databases, that will allow parents, practitioners, the media, advocates, and policymakers greater access to current knowledge on parenting adolescents.

Some clearinghouses already exist. For example, the National Dropout Prevention Center Network at Clemson University has a model program database which contains hundreds of dropout prevention programs taking place across the country, many of which provide support to families in encouraging their children to stay in school.[71](#) SAMHSA, CASEL, C2-SPECTR, and the What Works Clearinghouse are also resources that provide information on effective programs that can strengthen family processes.[72](#) Funders and policymakers can also invest in media initiatives and public awareness campaigns to disseminate widely the bottom-line messages on parenting adolescents for which widespread research agreement exists.[73](#)

Home–School Connections for College Preparation

The **Futures and Families Program (F&F)** was a 3-year bilingual outreach program for high school parents designed as part of a larger college preparation program for Latino high school students. F&F attempted to provide the knowledge necessary for parents to support their children along the path to enrollment in a 4-year college. Monthly bilingual parent meetings were held at the school and focused on college-related topics, access issues for families of color, and how to navigate the school and college application systems. Meetings were conducted at the Parent Center, facilitated by the bilingual Latina community liaison, and included presentations, panels, small group discussions, and activities. Nearly all parents in the program cited these meetings as their main source of college information. They valued the personal testimonies of guest speakers—Latino parents who themselves had supported their children's transition to college—and found support in their relationships with other parents. Strategic meetings with teachers to gauge students' progress and plan steps toward college also afforded parents a college-relevant network with school staff. Over time, parents also learned to question, critique, and advocate for equity in the school system.[39](#)

Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) is an organization dedicated to informing and motivating low-income parents to become knowledgeable about how to navigate the school system and seek the educational opportunities available for their youth. PIQE's programs include a 9-week training course taught in 14 languages by professional facilitators who provide parents with the tools to communicate with the school and promote academic progress and social

development in their youth. PIQE has successfully reduced high school drop out rates and college participation for Latino youth living in California. Specifically, the youth of parents attending and graduating from PIQE in one region of California achieved a high school graduation rate of 93%—compared to the national high school graduation rate for Latinos of 53%.⁴⁰ Moreover, nearly 80% of the Latino youth whose parents participated in PIQE enrolled in college. This surpasses the national average of 62% for college enrollment in the general population.

www.piqe.org

For practice

- *Approach family involvement in middle and high schools in multiple ways.* Family involvement in its varied forms matters for middle and high school students. As such, schools and youth development programs need to convey this message to parents and the community. Schools and programs also need to create strategies to encourage family involvement, especially in the upper grades, when involvement—but not its benefits—tends to decline. For example, parenting programs can help enhance family communication, support parent–youth relationships, and teach developmentally appropriate parent involvement skills. By devising opportunities for parents to develop relationships with school personnel and other parents, whether through involvement in school policy organizations or attendance at out-of-school time events, schools and community organizations can create occasions for families, students, and teachers to get to know each other and share beliefs and ideas about the importance of education.

Moreover, although parents might not manage children's homework in the same ways they did when their children were younger, schools and community organizations can help parents become knowledgeable of the habits of mind that support adolescent learning and productive homework completion. For example, the TIPS program for youth makes homework a student's responsibility and does not ask parents to teach subject matter; rather, as part of their assignment, TIPS asks students to share their work and ideas with families.

- *Facilitate parents' ability to monitor their adolescents' growth and progress.* Adolescence is a time when youth are striving to develop independence from their parents while maintaining connections to them. Thus, monitoring emerges as one of the most important parent behaviors in the adolescent years because it respects youths' increasing need for autonomy while maintaining parent–child relationships. Schools and other youth programs can make it easier for parents to know what is going on in their adolescents' lives by communicating information about individual performance and school and community-wide events on a regular basis. The more information parents can draw on, the more equipped those parents are to have meaningful conversations with their children, ask relevant questions, and support all aspects of their lives.
- *Support youth and their parents in the transition to college.* Schools and college staff working in community recruitment programs can help parents encourage their children's college careers by providing basic information

about college entrance processes, SAT preparation, financial aid, and course placements. High school educators can also support parents' encouragement for their children's college enrollment by providing direct help with the college selection through assigning interactive homework around college admissions processes (e.g., writing essays, researching statistics on different colleges, and preparing for the SAT).⁷⁴

Moreover, programs can build parent support groups and allow parents opportunities to voice their worries and concerns. For example, parent meetings in both the Puente Project and the Futures and Families Project were facilitated by parents and members of the community who came from backgrounds similar to those of the participants. Facilitators were able to draw from real experiences and help parents become familiar with the college preparation process from a nonthreatening perspective.

- *Develop a climate of high expectations in the home, school, and community.* High parental expectations are vital during adolescence, more than any other time in development. High parental expectations are linked to some of the more motivational qualities of achievement, including feelings of competence, task completion, and enrollment in difficult coursework. By maintaining high expectations, parents may boost students' perceived control and confidence, offer youth a sense of security and connectedness, and help students internalize educational values.⁷⁵

Schools and community organizations can help promote parents' expectations for their adolescent children by communicating academic progress frequently and providing opportunities for parents and youth to connect both in and out of school—so that parents can observe firsthand, guide, and advocate for their children's capability for autonomous self-expression, choice, and decision making. Program evaluation can also document how and with what effectiveness interventions are supporting parents' high but realistic expectations of youth.

- *Be sensitive to the cultural values of adolescents and their families.* Certain patterns of family involvement processes that result in positive outcomes for youth apply to some ethnic groups but not to others. Hence, it is important for educators to keep informed of the strategies that are relevant to the families with whom they work. For example, BFST tailors its program to the background of the adolescent's family. PIQE takes into consideration the unique challenges Latino families might have in preparing for the college experience, including issues related to immigration status as well as navigating difficult financial aid systems not in their native language.

For research

Overall, the *Family Involvement Makes a Difference* series highlights the ways in which families matter for child and youth outcomes throughout the developmental continuum. The research implications across this set of briefs have hinged consistently on four main themes: investigating points of transition, developing a culturally appropriate knowledge base, connecting research to policy and practice, and conducting longitudinal investigations.⁷⁶ In adolescence, these important four themes emerge again, albeit tailored to the specific needs of youth and their families.

- *Investigate the role of families in promoting smooth transitions for youth.* Much like the need for further research on children's transition into kindergarten noted in the first brief in this series, there is a need to better understand the multiple transitions faced by adolescents and how families may facilitate these experiences. Specifically, what is the role of families in helping youth move successfully from middle school to high school and from high school to postsecondary education? This research agenda also must include increased evaluation of college preparation programs with a family involvement component.
- *Build a culturally specific knowledge base related to family involvement in adolescence.* Research suggests that family involvement practices and their benefits vary based on families' economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. For example, an authoritative parenting style benefits some but not all students. Yet a more finely tuned understanding of what family involvement practices work, under what conditions, and for what groups of students has yet to be developed. A stronger research base with regard to these variations, and its application to policy and practice, are urgent in light of an increasingly ethnically diverse youth demographic and the large school drop out rate for poor and non-White youth.
- *Connect adolescent research to policy and practice.* Because of adolescents' newly developed cognitive, physical, and social skills, and ever-expanding social contexts, the positive social and academic outcomes for youth associated with family involvement are much more diverse than in other periods of development. Accordingly, researchers can continue to investigate the various outcomes associated with positive youth development inclusive of measuring rates of graduation, morality, goal orientation, and substance abuse.

More importantly, researchers can make sure that findings from these studies make it into the hands of those who need it most—parents, teachers, and policymakers. These findings can come through listservs, teacher- and parent-focused websites, newspapers, magazines, radio and television news clips and practitioner journals. Researchers might also begin to develop a community of practice around family involvement in adolescence to share findings and new ideas for how to translate well-designed research into practice.

- *Invest in longitudinal research and evaluations that examine the impact of family involvement from early childhood through high school and beyond.* As outlined in our previous briefs, studies can continue to examine how family involvement processes that began in early childhood evolve in elementary school and change again in middle and high school. This research must address the ways in which these transformations relate to specific child outcomes across the developmental continuum. In addition, research in adolescence can unpack whether family involvement declines in adolescence—or if, in fact, research simply has not yet developed measures that capture accurately the nature of family involvement in middle and high school. Researchers can begin to develop measures of parent school involvement that reflect these developmental variations.⁷⁷

Additionally, a fifth theme emerges related to the importance of investigating the variety of settings in which family involvement matters for youth outcomes.

- *Examine the ways families matter for youth outcomes across a variety of settings.* Research is beginning to document what years of experience have

shown—namely, that families are involved in their children's learning not just in schools and homes, but in a variety of settings. Other settings, even ones that might otherwise inhibit families' ability to be involved in middle and high schools, can provide opportunities and entry points for families to support learning. For example, a parent's work schedule need not be a barrier to involvement. A work environment might offer parenting workshops, provide flexible time so that parents can attend school functions and/or encourage parents and youth to use work-related office equipment during nonwork hours to support school-related assignments and activities.

New research agendas can broaden the definitions of family involvement, particularly in the period of adolescence, to include not just school and home but an integrated system of linked supports for children that encompasses both schools and nonschool settings. Harvard Family Research Project calls this comprehensive system of supports complementary learning ([see Complementary Learning text box for more information](#)). More research to establish the ways in which these linkages between the settings in which youth learn and grow is critical for ensuring that all youth have the supports that they need to be successful.

Involving Parents of Adolescents in Homework

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) is an interactive homework process developed by the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University. As part of their homework assignments, students are required to share their work and express their ideas with someone at home. Although parents are not expected to help their children on homework content, they are invited to pose questions and comments and give teachers feedback on the assignment. TIPS has been shown to help 6th–8th graders complete more accurate homework and get better grades.⁴⁴ Students attribute better grades to support they receive from their families, increased interest in the subject through family involvement, and an improved ability to talk through science concepts.

www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/TIPSmain.htm

Conclusion

Over the middle and high school years, youth experience immense physical changes and develop the abstract cognitive skills and identities that serve as the cornerstones of their adult lives. Youth also experience multiple transitions across various contexts, including the move into and out of middle school and high school. Despite youth's desire for autonomy, independence, and time with peers, the three family involvement processes of parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning remain important for healthy and positive development throughout the adolescent years.

Parenting that promotes supportive parent–youth relationships and is characterized by a high level of child monitoring is related to positive adolescent outcomes including social competence and good grades. Home–school relationships distinguished by bilateral communication and opportunities for participation in school based organizations and college outreach programs are likewise associated with students' healthy adjustment across transitions and higher educational expectations. And when

parents take responsibility for their youth's learning outcomes by managing homework, maintaining high academic expectations, and encouraging youth to go to college, youth are more likely to enroll in college and have higher self-esteem.

This brief highlights how these three family involvement processes matter for youth development for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers who create programs and policies for family involvement in the adolescent years. With family involvement processes in place during middle and high school, youth will be better prepared for smooth transitions to college and other postsecondary settings.

Series Conclusion

The *Family Involvement Makes a Difference* series began with the idea that families must be involved in their children's development and growth during early childhood, so that children will be ready to enter school in kindergarten. This series concludes with the complementary idea that families must continue to be involved in their children's growth and development all the way through the middle and secondary school years, so that children will be ready to exit the K–12 school system ready to enter college and begin their professional lives.

Family involvement matters for school success for every child of every age. Although the three processes—parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes—remain the same across various developmental periods, the nature of the specific activities associated with these processes change over time to match the developmental needs and community expectations present at different points in the lives of children and youth. Regardless of what the specific activities look like, family processes must be part of the continuous web of supports outside of the school that promote positive and healthy development.

Helping Parents Support Children's College Preparation

The **Puente Project** has programs at high schools and community colleges throughout California designed to increase the number of low-income Latino youth who attend college, complete their degrees, and return to their communities to serve as mentors and role models. Students participate in an intensive English enrichment program and are paired with successful trained mentors from the community who help them navigate the college admissions process. The Puente Project acknowledges that parents can play an essential role in preparing their children for college. Counselors in the Puente Project have frequent contact with parents in one-on-one sessions and at parent workshops.

The program seeks to give parents knowledge about schooling and postsecondary planning, as well as open discussions about parents' feelings about sending children to colleges where they will live away from home. The counselors frequently come from backgrounds similar to participants and view parents as important partners with valid concerns about sending their children to college. Students who participate in the Puente Project have higher aspirations than their peers, are more likely to be willing to sacrifice time with friends for academics, and are more likely to spend time with friends from school rather than other friends at greater rates than their peers.⁶⁴ Moreover, students in the Puente Project enter college, graduate from college, and transfer to 4-year colleges from community colleges at greater rates

than their peers.

www.puente.net

Appendix I: Method

This research brief examined the family involvement processes in adolescence related to educational success. It synthesized the outcome-based empirical research published over the last 7 years (1999–2006) catalogued in the Family Involvement Network of Educators bibliographic database (www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/bibliography). Outcome-based investigations were defined as those that measured family involvement and then linked family involvement to outcomes considered representative of adolescents' positive growth and development. The FINE bibliographies compile family involvement research using the electronic databases ERIC, Education Abstracts, PsychINFO, SocioFILE, Current Contents, and Dissertation Abstracts. Articles are searched using a combination of the keywords “parent,” “family,” “home,” “teacher,” and “school.” The search is further refined to include specific terms such as “family school relationships,” “parent teacher cooperation,” “teacher training,” and “family involvement.” This review only culled the articles from the FINE bibliographies that focused on family involvement as it relates to youth outcomes.

Most articles in this review were published in peer-reviewed journals. Nearly all of them used quantitative analyses on data yielded from sound research designs. Recent reviews of literature examining the link between family involvement processes and student achievement were included when available. Some qualitative studies that described the family involvement practices associated with children's school achievement were included, as were seminal articles and books published prior to 1999. All journal articles and books were summarized and coded for methodology, family involvement practices, and children's outcomes. In addition, evaluation reports of the five programs featured in this review were examined. These reports came from various sources including journals, the internet and unpublished manuscripts from HFRP's evaluation database.

More Family Involvement Resources From HFRP

For more information to help you design, implement, and evaluate family involvement work, consider making use of the following resources:

Taking a Closer Look: A Guide to Online Resources on Family Involvement

This comprehensive resource guide compiles and categorizes the large body of information on family involvement in children's education. It contains Web links to research, information, programs, and tools from over 100 national organizations. It provides information about parenting practices to support children's learning and development, home–school relationships, parent leadership development, and collective engagement for school improvement and reform.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/guide/index.html

Bibliography on Family Involvement in Adolescence

This bibliography compiled by Harvard Family Research Project highlights family

involvement research literature published from 1999 to the present.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/bibliography/adolescence.html

Parental Involvement in Homework: A Review of Current Research and Its Implications for Teachers, After School Program Staff, and Parent Leaders

Researchers from the Family–School Partnership Lab at Vanderbilt University review the literature on parental involvement in homework to understand why parents become involved in their children's homework, how they are involved, and how these activities contribute to students learning. The authors suggest ways in which schools can invite parents to be involved in homework.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/homework.html

The Evaluation Exchange: Evaluating Family Involvement Programs

This issue of *The Evaluation Exchange* addresses the challenges of evaluating family programs, such as the need for conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, accountability, and contextual responsiveness.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue28/index.html

Making a Decision About College: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The teaching case *Making a Decision About College: Should I Stay or Should I Go?* considers a young woman's dilemma in deciding whether or not to leave her family to go to college in a distant part of the country. Two experts offer case commentaries.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/college.html

Adolescence: Are Parents Relevant to Students' High School Achievement and Post-Secondary Attainment?

This Research Digest uses National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) data to show that parents' high educational expectations positively affect students' academic achievement in high school.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/digest/adolescence.html

Join the Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)

Our Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a national network of over 7,000 people who are interested in promoting strong partnerships between children's educators, their families, and their communities. There is no cost to become a FINE member. Once you become a member, you'll receive our monthly email announcements of current ideas in family involvement and new resources that have been added to the FINE website.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/joinfine.html

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Notes

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