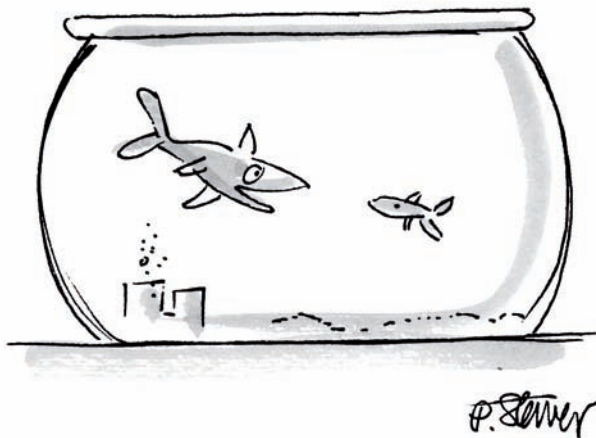




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Get Involved!

The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has some good news for stressed and concerned parents: it does not require a PhD or unlimited hours for parents to make a difference in their children's education. This chapter discusses how parental involvement benefits students – and how particular forms of involvement may be more beneficial than others.



"You can be anything you want to be—no limits."



Most parents know, instinctively, that spending more time with their children and being actively involved in their education will give their children a good head-start in life. But since most parents have to juggle competing demands at work and at home, there never seems to be enough time. Sometimes, too, parents are reluctant to offer to help their children with school work because they feel ill-equipped to do so. They fear that they've forgotten what they had learned as students; or they worry that they had never studied the subjects their children are now studying and so can be of no real help. Some parents also believe that only the school is responsible for educating their children.

The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has some good news for stressed and concerned parents: it does not require a PhD or unlimited hours for parents to make a difference in their children's education. In fact, many parent-child activities that are associated with better reading performance among students involve relatively little time and no specialised knowledge. What these activities do demand, though, is genuine interest and active engagement – with the understanding that education is a shared responsibility.

In 2009, countries and economies that participated in PISA were offered a questionnaire to be filled out by the parents of students who took the PISA test. The questionnaire sought information on:

- parents' background, such as educational attainment, occupation and income levels;
- household environment, including the number of siblings who live with the student taking the PISA test, the availability of reading resources, expenditure on educational services, parental perceptions of their child's school, and priorities when choosing a school; and
- parental involvement and reading habits, including whether parents (or other household members) were actively involved with their children when they entered primary school, their present levels of involvement (their children were 15 when they took the PISA test), and parents' own attitudes towards reading.

Fourteen countries and economies disseminated the parental questionnaire, although one, Poland, did not ask the questions related to parental involvement. The questionnaire was distributed in Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Korea, New Zealand and Portugal (which are OECD member countries) and in Croatia, Hong Kong-China, Lithuania, Macao-China, Panama and Qatar (which are not members of the OECD).¹

Parents' responses to this questionnaire were recorded and related to their children's performance in PISA. The idea was to determine not only what kinds of parental involvement matters for children's cognitive skills, as measured by how well 15-year-olds read, but also whether students whose parents are more involved in their education are better equipped to continue learning throughout their lives than students whose parents are not as involved.

Reading is an essential skill that enables people to understand the world around them. Parents are naturally involved in the process of acquiring this skill as all new parents witness and encourage the seemingly miraculous development of language and speech throughout the early months and years of their children's lives. PISA wanted to find out whether active parental engagement throughout childhood influences how well students read, how well they manage difficult academic tasks, and the extent to which parents can foster an interest in reading in their children.



Parents were asked whether they participated in certain activities on school premises, such as discussing their child's progress or behaviour with a teacher, either at the teacher's or their own initiative, or volunteering at the school for extracurricular activities or at the library or media centre. They were also asked whether they told stories, sang songs or played with alphabet toys with their child when the child was just entering primary school, and whether, at the time of the PISA test – that is, when their child was 15 – they helped their child with homework, ate the main meal with their child around a table, or simply talked with their child. Parents were also asked about their own reading habits and attitudes towards books and reading.

PISA found that certain activities were more strongly related to better student performance than others. Which kinds of activities benefit children the most? Reading books to children when they are just beginning primary school and talking with adolescents about topical political or social issues are shown to have a positive impact on children's learning. Even just reading at home benefits children, because it shows them that reading is something that their parents value.

Children whose parents are involved in their education in these ways are generally found to be more receptive to language; they are also more adept at planning, setting goals, initiating and following through in their studies and individual projects. Essentially, children who have mastered these kinds of skills have learned how to learn – and that will help them not only during their years in education, but throughout the rest of their lives.

Box 1.1 **How does parental involvement benefit students?**

As PISA and many other studies show, students show a better ability to read and learn when their parents are involved in their education and when the parents themselves value reading. In this sense, student learning is most effective when it is the result of a partnership among the school, teachers, parents and the community.² Experts in the field point to the fact that involved parents help their children to develop their receptive language and phonetic awareness, and help their children to acquire the skills they need to learn by showing them how to plan, monitor and be aware of the learning process. Teachers may pay more attention to students if they know their parents are more involved. In general, children of involved parents are more motivated to learn for learning's sake, and have more control over their academic performance because they adopt their parents' positive attitudes towards school and learning. They know, too, that they can obtain guidance from their parents on how to navigate school and its challenges. Children of involved parents are more familiar with the tasks required of them at school because parents share this kind of information with them.³ And children of parents who read and enjoy reading themselves absorb their parents' interest in reading and enjoy reading too.



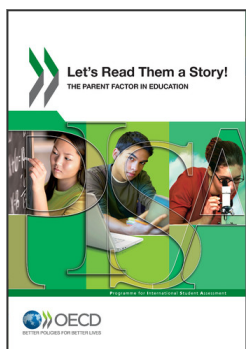
Box 1.2 **The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)**

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), examines the extent to which students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are necessary for full participation in modern societies, focusing on reading, mathematics and science. PISA not only assesses whether 15-year-olds can reproduce knowledge, but also how well they can use what they have learned and apply it in unfamiliar settings, both in and outside of school. The survey, which is conducted every three years, also collects contextual information about the students, their families and their schools, as well as a host of information gathered directly from the parents. In 2009, more than 400 000 students in 65 countries and economies participated in PISA, whose focus that year was on reading. The PISA surveys and assessments, which are the most comprehensive and rigorous international measurement of student skills in the three core subjects, are specifically designed and tested to ensure fair comparisons across countries.



Notes

1. Caution must be exercised when using the results for this limited set of countries and economies to make decisions regarding parental involvement in other countries and economies in the broader sample of countries that have participated in the PISA assessment and beyond.
2. Epstein, J. (1995), "School Family Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share", *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 76(9), pp. 701-712.
3. Pomerantz, E.M., et al. (2007), "The How, Whom and Why of Parents' Involvement in Children's Academic Lives: More Is Not Always Better", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 77(3), pp. 373-410.



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