

Father's Interest in Child's School Life Can Override Negative Influences

A father's interest and involvement in his child's life at school, when added to that of the mother, packs a powerful one-two punch in that child's favor, concludes a new study by Brent McBride, a University of Illinois professor of human development and family studies.

The study also found that father involvement lessens the impact of growing up in a low-income home or poor neighborhood or attending a school that has few resources. "When fathers are involved in their child's education, it mediates some of the negative effects these environmental stressors have on the child," McBride said.

In the study, the researcher worked with 1,334 families with children between the ages of five and twelve to learn how men engage in the educational process with their children, how their activity compares to what mothers are doing, and whether father involvement makes a unique contribution to the student's development.

"We already know from research that a mother's involvement has a direct impact on student achievement," McBride said. "In this study, we found that when fathers get involved, especially when they're communicating and partnering with teachers, there's a significant additive effect over and above the mother's involvement," he said.

The researcher looked at three ways parents could be involved with the school system. "The first was talking with their children about what's going on at school, asking what they're learning, and knowing who their friends are. Then we tried to learn if parents went to parent-teacher conferences, volunteered for PTA activities, that sort of thing. The third thing we looked at was the kind of involvement parents had with teachers and administrators--whether they were communicating with them in a constructive way."

McBride used a special model that allowed him to chart all these influences at the same time, statistically controlling for what other influences the other factors would have.

He was struck by the finding that father involvement can compensate for some of the negative influences children face. "Research shows that kids from poor homes don't do as well in school for lots of different reasons. It's important to know that it helps when the man in the child's life gets involved in the educational process," McBride said.

Other interesting findings were that black fathers, biological fathers, and fathers of boys tend to be more involved with their children's education.

"We weren't really expecting to find differences in communication patterns based on race and ethnicity, but if African American fathers already have this relationship, schools should be building on that to make it even stronger," he said.

McBride urged schools to abandon the mindset that moms alone can make the difference. "When schools talk about parent involvement, they're usually talking about mother involvement. Frankly, not all teachers are comfortable reaching out to fathers," he said.

"Most teachers, especially in elementary and middle school, are women. And teachers who are working with children from single-parent homes or blended families in high-risk, low-income backgrounds may not have the tools, the repertoire in their language, and so on, to deal with fathers effectively. We may have to help schools change the way they look at parent involvement and give teachers the tools to reach out to men," he said.

