

Research Reveals New Pathway for Parental Involvement

One of the only things that people can agree about when they discuss American education and schooling is the important role that parents play throughout the whole process. Ask what that role should entail, however, and you will discover gaping divisions of thought among teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and parents themselves.

This has been exasperating for those of us who have championed increased parental involvement during the past several decades, primarily because the field is so ripe with opportunity. After all, children spend only about 13 percent of their waking hours in school from birth to age 18. If we could somehow take better advantage of that other 87 percent, the possibilities seem limitless.

Now it appears that all of us who were providing encouragement and materials for parents to help their children better understand school subjects (like math or geography or science) have been barking up the wrong tree. I don't mean that we have been harmful or unhelpful, but what recent research is showing quite clearly is that there is another area of children's development that has much more to do with their success in school and in life than does any teaching or tutoring in school subjects that their parents may provide.

The past few years have seen numerous books and eye-opening research studies on the “noncognitive factors” that contribute in powerful ways to children's success in school. As a group, what these studies have shown is that there are character traits that help children succeed both in school and in life. Children who have developed these characteristics—no matter what their socioeconomic status may be—are much more likely than their counterparts to stay in



school, get better grades in school, enroll in college, and not drop out of college.

So, what are these miraculous qualities, and what do parents need to know about them?

Qualities for Success

Angela Duckworth (author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*) and Stephanie Donaldson-Pressman and her co-authors (*The Learning Habit: A Groundbreaking Approach to Homework and Parenting that Helps Our Children Succeed in School and Life*) focus on what they call “grit”—a passionate commitment and dedication to achieve. We might use words like *initiative*, *diligence*, and *perseverance* to relate the same idea—three words that show the steps that must be taken to achieve any goal, project, or mission.

Isn't that also what learning requires? Whether it's learning how to spell, how to solve for X, or even how to play the piano, each is impossible without the learner's trying to learn

(initiative), then applying himself or herself to the task (diligence), and then continuing to try hard even in the face of failure (perseverance). Without all three attributes, a student will either not try to do the work required to learn, or will abandon the effort when failure arrives before success.

Other “noncognitive factors” championed in these recent studies include curiosity, self-control, the ability to see failure as a learning experience, respect, and empathy.

Up until now, parental involvement in their children's learning has focused on ways that parents can act as teachers or tutors to help their children better understand school subjects, but this new line of research offers the root of a different role for parents.

It Starts at Home

Parents don't have to know the preferred method for teaching long division, but they can be experts in helping their children develop grit. In fact, parents are the best people in the world to foster their children's growth in curiosity, perseverance, self-control, empathy, and the handful of other noncognitive factors that are the bedrock of learning—better even than teachers.

The simple fact is that schools were not designed to teach such things, but families were. Classrooms, textbooks, and standardized tests were created to deliver and assess content knowledge. And while some schools have tried to make “character education” part of their curriculum, the results have proved disappointing wherever this approach has been tried. Virtue and character are just different from spelling and arithmetic, and so are the underlying attributes that help children learn spelling and arithmetic. These vital attributes can be taught, and they can be learned, but not in the ways we customarily associate with schooling.

Still, all the noncognitive factors that are necessary for children to

become competent, principled, lifelong learners are just as important to teachers and to schools as they are to parents. Think about it: Teachers want their students to become good learners and to achieve good grades and high scores on standardized tests. But now it is clear that to do this, students must first develop the attributes and character traits that are best learned outside of school.

Parents want their children to be able to take advantage of every learning opportunity they can find, and their local public schools offer a variety of these opportunities every day. But for children to avail themselves of these opportunities and become good learners, they must have developed the attributes and character traits that are best learned at home.

All great partnerships are created out of complementary needs and benefits. This one would be no different. Perhaps the greatest advantage that this potential parent/teacher partnership has going for it is that a structure is already in place to house it. Almost every elementary and middle school has a parent-teacher association (PTA) or parent-teacher organization (PTO). During the past couple decades, these groups have lost most of their place as a liaison between parents and teachers, and now they function primarily as a fundraising arm of the school.

But why couldn't these PTAs and PTOs be at the center of a new parent/teacher partnership based on the clear needs and benefits of both parties? Why couldn't school districts encourage their PTAs and PTOs to devote some of their monthly meetings to spreading the word about what these groundbreaking studies and books have revealed about the character traits that are so vital to children's success both inside and outside of school?

At one such parent meeting, for example, a teacher might talk about specific books and stories that parents can use to show their children the

importance of perseverance. Parents, then, can share their experiences with home activities that teach the same message. The next month, the focus may be on developing empathy, curiosity, or the ability to learn from failure.

Through these meetings, and through the summaries and emails sent out to all school parents, conversations will begin and ideas will be exchanged about how best to instill these vital attributes through out-of-school activities and learning experiences.

Here, at last, we have the possibility that teachers and parents, homes and schools, can begin pulling on the same end of the rope. Here is the framework for a real partnership—one in which each party recognizes and respects the special skills, importance, and irreplaceability of the other. These new partnerships will begin in some enlightened school district quite soon, I think, and once they do, our schools, and our children, will never be the same. ■

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Statement of Ownership

Principal (ISSN 0271-6062) (Act of August 12, 1970; Section 3685, Title 39 United State Code.) Date of filing: 22 September 2016. Frequency of issue, 5 issues per year. Annual subscription price \$235 with membership. Publication and general business offices, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3483. Editor-in-Chief, Kaylen Tucker. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders, none. The purpose, function, and non-profit status of the National Association of Elementary School Principals and its exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding 12 months. During the preceding 12 months, the average number of copies printed for each issue was 20,295; the average number of copies distributed, 19,430. The figures for September/October 2016: 22,411 copies printed; 15,112 total paid circulation; 6,388 copies for free distribution; total number of copies distributed, 21,500.

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