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Head of the Class

Parental involvement overrated? Don't buy it

By Todd Rogers, Lucas Coffman and Peter Bergman

updated 4:08 PM EDT, Mon May 5, 2014



Keeping parents informed about their children's progress in school can help with homework completion, the authors say.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Writers: Recent articles said helping children with schoolwork has little value

They say it's a misreading of research because kids getting help often fare poorly anyway

They say numerous studies show grades, attendance improve when parents onboard

Writers: Texting parents on progress, holding meetings with teachers critical to success

Editor's note: *Todd Rogers is assistant professor of public policy at Harvard Kennedy School. Lucas Coffman is assistant professor of economics at Ohio State University. Peter Bergman is assistant professor of economics and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the authors.*

(CNN) -- Should you be involved with your children's schooling?

Several recent articles have questioned the common belief that parent involvement is critical to improving student performance in school. One recent New York Times op-ed, titled "Parental Involvement Is Overrated," and an Atlantic piece called "Don't Help Your Kids With Their Homework," touched off a heated discussion online suggesting that parental involvement is of surprisingly little value to student achievement and, if anything, does more harm than good.

This interpretation of the evidence is misguided. Worse, it sends a dangerous message to families and policymakers: Encouraging parental involvement is unlikely to improve educational outcomes or reduce achievement gaps.

Citing their research, the authors of the Times piece, Keith Robinson and Angel L. Harris, describe provocative findings that show that students of parents who are very involved in their children's

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Frida Ghitis says if kidnapping 230 girls had happened almost anywhere else, it would be the world's biggest story. Coverage of the Malaysian plane resulted in an international effort; we need that to save these girls.

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House Speaker John Boehner says the U.S. needs to finish the job right in Afghanistan; history will judge us not on whether we ended wars, but how we ended them

Death penalty is unchristian



Todd Rogers



Lucas Coffman



Peter Bergman

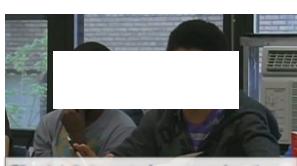
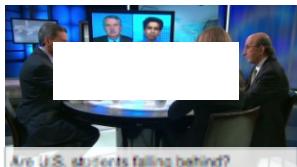
education perform worse than students of parents who are less involved.

While the authors control for certain variables, their research only implies there is a relationship between parental involvement and student performance. This caveat is important; the existence of a relationship does not tell us what causes what.

Think of it this way: If you had two children, and one was getting A's and the other C's, which of them would you help more? The C student. An outsider, noticing that you've spent the school year helping only one of your children, might infer that parental help caused that child to earn lower grades. This of course would not be the case, and inferring causation here would be a mistake.

Fortunately, a rapidly growing body of research -- including our own -- looks at whether low-cost parental engagement interventions can cause changes in student performance. We are researchers in economics and psychology who conduct randomized controlled experiments in educational settings.

Randomized experiments, modeled after medical clinical trials, are the "gold standard" for understanding whether a given behavior causes a change in a specific outcome. Results from these experiments suggest that involving parents is a potent, cost-effective and scalable way to increase student achievement in a number of settings.



Highlights from this new literature include interventions in low-income areas of Brazil, France, India and the United States. [Sending parents](#) whose high school children attended school in a low-income area of Los Angeles text messages when their kids miss assignments can cause student performance to increase as much as high-performing charter schools cause student performance to increase. In France, [inviting parents](#) to meetings with school staff on how to navigate the transition to middle school and also providing materials on the roles of different school personnel reduces truancy by 25%.

[Paying low-income parents in India](#) to improve their children's literacy can be as effective at increasing child literacy as paying the children directly, especially if the parents are literate and have the time and resources to devote to their children. Providing [literacy classes for mothers in India](#) can meaningfully increase children's test scores. [Asking Boston teachers to call middle school parents](#) in the evening to let them know about their children's academic progress, behavior and upcoming assignments can cut in-class misbehavior by 25% and improve on-time homework completion by 40%.

[Delivering brief messages to parents](#) on a weekly basis about what their children are doing well and doing poorly can cut summer school dropout rate almost in half. [Sending parents two letters](#) and providing access to a website with information about the usefulness of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, classes can increase the number of STEM classes their high school children take by one full semester. [Texting poor parents in Brazil](#) if their child skips school can empower parents to compel the child to attend school.

[Informing parents of public schools' average test scores](#) leads parents to choose higher performing schools for their children. [At H&R Block](#), allowing parents the option to have a federal financial aid form auto-filled for them using their tax return data can increase the likelihood that their child completes two years of college over the next

updated 8:59 AM EDT, Tue May 6, 2014



Jay Parini says Dickens and Tolstoy were both repulsed by capital punishment, noting its fallibility and hypocrisy. It's odd that those opposed to abortion often condone the state taking a life, he says

When air becomes a public health hazard

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Dan Farber says at the very least, federal law should not be used to block state efforts to control pollution.

I'm a gun owner and I want gun control

updated 5:08 PM EDT, Fri May 2, 2014



Mark O'Mara says gun rights advocates must allow reasonable flexibility on Second Amendment.

Should extinct species be brought back to life?

updated 7:48 AM EDT, Mon May 5, 2014



Scientists are working to revive extinct species with advances in genetics but that shouldn't distract from essential efforts to protect biodiversity, says John Sutter.

Sell the Clippers to the people

updated 10:12 PM EDT, Fri May 2, 2014



Newt Gingrich says sports teams are really public in nature and the fans, not billionaires, should own them.

In MH370 search, incompetence, lost time

updated 3:59 PM EDT, Fri May 2, 2014



Bill Palmer says a preliminary report from Malaysia officials shows how a series of communication snafus delayed for four crucial hours any attempts to find the lost plane.

Why is California 'worst'?

updated 9:04 AM EDT, Fri May 2, 2014



David Pettit says there are too many cars and trucks, oil refineries and industrial facilities in California.

How 'Star Wars' ruined sci-fi

updated 1:38 PM EDT, Mon May 5, 2014



Lewis Beale says the money-making has corrupted people's notion of a literary genre full of ideas.

Actress: In Iran, my counterpart faces prison

updated 8:57 AM EDT, Fri May 2, 2014



Nazanin Boniadi: Actors, filmmakers, artists and people from all walks of life are political prisoners in Iran.

Can big data transform social justice?

updated 1:08 PM EDT, Fri May 2, 2014

three years from 28% to 36%. This is a new area of research, and there are more questions than answers, but the results are extremely promising and mutually supporting.

Parents are a cornerstone of educational success, and we need policies that empower, inform and involve them. The good news is that research on what kinds of cost-effective policies this entails is under way.

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Phillip Goff says tracking police stops and use of force may help us figure out how to reduce racial disparities.

Obama, a lame duck for 33 months?

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David Gergen says the key to staying relevant may be finding a way to reinvigorate the president's foreign policy

Palin goes too far, again

updated 4:47 PM EDT, Thu May 1, 2014



David Perry says Sarah Palin's comparison of waterboarding to baptism is divisive rhetoric and evokes persecution of Jews and Muslims

Will racism end when the old guys die off?

updated 5:02 PM EDT, Thu May 1, 2014



Chuck Walton looks at the generational differences in racial attitudes in America after the Sterling and Bundy cases

Elizabeth Warren: What happened to the middle class?

updated 10:16 AM EDT, Thu May 1, 2014



Sen. Elizabeth Warren says policies have favored the rich and powerful for so long the middle class is losing ground. We can change that if Washington changes its priorities.

The 3-D revolution will blow you away

updated 10:57 AM EDT, Wed April 30, 2014



Sally Kohn says if a company in China can print 10 houses in a day, imagine the potential of 3D printers.

What happened to Sterling was morally wrong

updated 10:55 AM EDT, Wed April 30, 2014



Marc Randazza says easily recording and leaking private speech -- even that of a bad person -- portends a chilling future without privacy. Shouldn't we condemn that along with Sterling's racist blather?

As U.S. warms, dangerous mosquito thrives

updated 1:40 PM EDT, Wed April 30, 2014



Durland Fish, Mark Pagani and Anthony Leiserowitz say climate change is helping the disease-carrying Asian tiger mosquito expand its range in the U.S.

Why you'll hate the Internet 'fast lane'

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**Captain Moonlight** • a day ago

So many of our society's problems originate with absentee parents or lack of effort by the ones who do stick around.

Parents that get involved and don't expect the school system to raise their kids for them should be applauded.

128   • Reply • Share **Alan Dike** ➔ **Captain Moonlight** • 21 hours ago

Totally agree.. now we need to remind people that involvement IS NOT doing their homework for them. Thats a disturbing trend I've seen recently.. kids do great in school, until it comes test time. Ends up, parents are doing the kids work for them instead of leading them through the exercises.

40   • Reply • Share **Lee** ➔ **Alan Dike** • 18 hours ago

Good point. The main effort should come from the students. Parents should play a role of encouragement and honest help.

14   • Reply • Share **TeeBeeSanford** ➔ **Alan Dike** • 3 hours ago

I agree with you with one caveat. I know the problem I've noticed with my younger two children (didn't see it with the older two) is the amount of homework and the complexity of the assignment. For example, my 4th grade daughter is working on her final assignment for the year. This would be the sixth such project, in which there is a 6 paragraph essay, a poster board with either depictions of artifacts, timelines or a created artifact along with a memorized speech and presentation for the class, including a costume. Subject matter is historical person born before 1950. Other such projects included Native American uses for natural resources. Historical Hispanic figures and their contributions to society. How and what we can do to help with our energy consumption with models of alternative energy etc. Seriously? Come on who out there really thinks a 9 year old can accomplish this alone? This on top of the appx. 2 hrs. of homework she has each night. For 4th grade??? I can tell you, my child is an a-b student and a high achiever but mom now has a working knowledge of how Native Americans lived, can answer any trivial pursuit question about Rita Moreno, have a solid grasp on alternative energy and anything you'd ever want to know about

see more

9   • Reply • Share **Renée Hendrix** ➔ **TeeBeeSanford** • 2 hours ago

This mother of five hates these type of assignments, which are clearly designed for extensive parental involvement. At times, it becomes a stupid creativity competition among parents. I already went to school, don't give ME homework!

5   • Reply • Share **Interested in everything** ➔ **TeeBeeSanford** • 2 hours ago

Curriculum is outdated. Historical figures that lived before 1950 is less important than future innovations in math and science. I agree - that's way too much of the WRONG work for a child. We need to teach our students things that will help them thrive in the digital world, not be able to recite "in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue" which has literally NEVER come up in my professional life.



Coryne McSherry says the public should voice its concerns about FCC's proposed rules that will end net neutrality

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