

# ED355314 1992-12-00 Helping Young Urban Parents Educate Themselves and Their Children. ERIC/CUE Digest, Number 85.

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**ERIC Identifier:** ED355314

**Publication Date:** 1992-12-00

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**Source:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York NY.

# Helping Young Urban Parents Educate Themselves and Their Children. ERIC/CUE Digest, Number 85.

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INTRODUCTION

No discussion of school reform or education policy issues these days seems complete without references to "parent involvement." Most educators would agree this term goes far beyond the traditional view of parents as field trip chaperons and cookie bakers--from preparing children for school, to education choice, to new forms of school governance. Nevertheless, much of the literature still defines parent involvement as those activities supporting what the schools define as involvement, and continues to address what PARENTS SHOULD DO.

The demographics of urban schools, in particular, are causing this view of parent involvement to be challenged, however, as increasing numbers of very young parents, most of whom are single, poor, and not well-educated, need multiple services to help create a caring environment for their children. The focus of involvement is shifting not to what schools should do for parents, but to how to form genuine school-family partnerships.

Research data on parent involvement that separate out young, low-income and/or minority parents are just emerging. Although, as a sub-group, the young parent is not yet fully addressed in the literature, urban schools increasingly must cope with the consequences of mothers who had babies when they were still very young themselves.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

Teenage pregnancy rates are rising. The largest increase is among the youngest--ages 15-17. Their birth rates (births per 1,000 females) rose 19 percent between 1986 and 1989, according to Child Trends, Inc. (1992). During the same time, the rates for ages 18-19 and for women in their twenties each increased 7 percent. In 1989, about 518,000 girls under age 20 became mothers. Two-thirds of these births were to single mothers, compared to 25 percent of the women in their twenties. These families, headed by single mothers, comprise the fastest growing category of family groups, according to Danziger and Farber (1990). As a percentage of their racial group, single motherhood is a particular issue for African Americans; 58 percent of all black families with children are headed by single mothers, compared to 19 percent of whites. Less

than 25 years ago, the percentage for black families was only 15 percent.

## CONSEQUENCES FOR MOTHER AND CHILD

For those who become unwed mothers at a young age, there are immediate disadvantages that have lifelong effects. Wilson (1986) says they are less likely to ever get married, they have more children than the average, they are more likely to be poor, and their formal education ends early.

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**Mother's Education.** Having a baby means dropping out of school for 80 percent of teenage mothers, and only 56 percent finally graduate from high school (Armstrong & Waszak, 1992). Further, a teenage parent will make only one-half of the lifetime earnings of a mother who waited until at least age 20 to have her first child. Being a teenage mother also means living below the poverty line; in 1986, 81 percent of young mothers living alone had incomes below the Federal poverty level. Even if married, their poverty rates were twice the national average.

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**Family Income.** Early childbearing is more than a personal tragedy. The Center for Population Options (Armstrong & Waszak, 1992) estimates that in 1990, the annual cost of teenage motherhood (welfare, food stamps, Medicaid) was \$25 billion. If the teenage births in that year had been delayed until the mother was age 20, the savings in support services would have been 40 percent.

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**Child's School Readiness.** The children of low-income young mothers, more often than not, are unprepared for formal schooling. The Educational Testing Service (1992) contends that even after controlling for key socioeconomic differences between one- and two-parent families, students living with both parents perform better academically in school. Low-income families do not have the resources to create literacy-rich home environments, and reading at home makes for better readers at school.

Similarly, the level of verbal interaction affects how well young children develop thinking skills. Young mothers who dropped out of school, or have not experienced a stimulating workplace, may lack the skills to use language elaborately with their children. Sigel (1991) finds that when parents use low-level or authoritative oral strategies with preschool children, the children perform poorly on tasks requiring memory or problem-solving. A low-level question would be: "What color is the shoe?" A high-level one would be: "Are there other ways you might draw the house?"

## DIFFERENT VIEWS OF YOUNG FAMILIES

Most of the research and program efforts reflect these "deficit" perceptions of children from families in poverty and attribute the inadequate preparation of young children for school to economic status, racial/ethnic conditioning, single parenthood, or dysfunctional family life.

There is, however, another view contending that none of the research so far really describes the process by which parents prepare their children for school and, further, that it perpetuates stereotypes of particular groups (Iglesias, 1992). Even the most poverty-stricken families or those with very poor literacy skills have been good early teachers for their children (Clark, 1989). They set aside time for learning, make opportunities for a lot of family discussion, and go together with their children to outside resources, such as libraries. Clark calls this "quality of family life style."

Similarly, Scott-Jones (1987) found that low-income, minority parents who want to help their children with home learning in the early grades, and do so, have varying skills. Such differences are one of the reasons why Iglesias (1992) argues that parenting and parent involvement programs should be tailored to the individual needs of each family instead of forcing every family to fit into a single type of program. "It is essential," he says, "that we begin asking families what they want, rather than providing them only those services which are immediately at our disposal."

Several recent studies contend that parent involvement in schools suffers because educators do not understand different family cultures or even the circumstances that make parenting difficult for poor families. They describe situations where it is not lack of parental interest in the education of their children that causes poor communication with the schools, as many educators believe, but, rather, parental feelings of alienation from the schools.

In Appalachia, for example, the Education Writers Association (1992) notes that school failure by mothers over several generations leads again and again to early pregnancies, dropping out, and extreme difficulties in re-entering the education system. These mothers and others interviewed for this report generally felt ignored or misunderstood by the schools because of their poverty and/or lack of English proficiency. The interviews were with populations of young families--inner-city African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and rural Appalachians. Garlington (1991) found similar attitudes in a project with inner-city Baltimore families whose children were in the middle grades. She dismisses the stereotype of parents who do not care about their children's schooling, pointing out that when they have the confidence to become advocates for their children, the parents no longer feel "invisible, voiceless, and powerless."

## TRADITIONAL PROGRAMS

The myriad of ways schools attempt to encourage parent involvement and fulfill their responsibilities to parents is described in five types by Epstein (1992). These are:



\* Basic obligations of families: Positive home conditions that support learning are a responsibility of families; schools help families become informed and skillful at understanding their children and supporting their learning at home through various activities such as parent training and information giving.



\* Basic obligations of schools: Schools are responsible for communicating with families about school programs and children's progress, ordinarily through notices, phone calls, visits, report cards and conferences; schools vary in the frequency of communications and in ability to make them understood by families.



\* Involvement at school: Parents assist teachers, children, or other school personnel as volunteers; schools vary their schedules to encourage such involvement and recruit and train volunteers.



\* Involvement in learning activities at home: Teachers request and guide parents to monitor and assist their children at home.



\* Involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy: Parents serve in participatory roles and also may become activists through involvement in advocacy groups; schools help parents become leaders through training, involving them in meaningful decision-making, and providing information to advocacy groups.

Schools with comprehensive programs encompassing all of these forms of parent involvement help parents build the conditions at home that support student learning, and there are hundreds of practices from which to choose.

Since her original research, Epstein has added a sixth form of involvement--collaboration and exchange with community organizations. In this form, schools collaborate with agencies, businesses, cultural organizations, and other groups to share responsibility for the education of children. They make it more feasible for children and families to have access to these services and supports.

Other researchers define parent involvement on the basis of the direct beneficiary of the intervention. Parent involvement programs which are meant to benefit the child focus on parents as interveners, parent/child relations, stimulating the senses, and parents as classroom aides. Programs with parents as beneficiaries emphasize emotional support,

resource access, parenting skills, and the like.

The literature on parent involvement summarized by Henderson, Marburger, and Ooms (1986) describes most school communication as formal and one-way, that is, from school to home. Also, parents complain that their most personal communication with schools usually only occurs because of a problem or crisis.

However, in the earliest grades, urban schools appear to have developed special strategies. A study of the transition from preschools to kindergartens found that there was more opportunity for parents in high-poverty schools (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992). This probably is because such schools are involved in Federal or state programs that stress home visits. In schools with preschool programs, the parent education workshops and home visits are more prevalent before children reach kindergarten.

Among low-income and/or minority families, parent involvement is difficult to encourage. Studies of early intervention programs for high-risk children found parents reluctant to participate or high rates of dropping out of specially designed programs (Iglesias, 1992). Only about one of ten low-income parents belongs to a parent-teacher organization (Educational Testing Service, 1992). Furthermore, adolescent parents are especially hard to reach.

## SCHOOL ATTITUDES

School attitudes and practices regarding parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools directly influence how much parents will support learning at home, according to Dauber and Epstein (1989). Parents who feel the school is actively trying to involve them have a more positive attitude about the school, and they give higher ratings to teachers who try to involve them. Although teachers in the Chapter 1 schools involved in Epstein's research project felt most parents were not involved and did not want to be, parents expressed different feelings. They reported that they were involved with their children and wanted more advice from teachers about how to help their children.

Despite the problems in drawing parents into schools, some programs and schools have learned to involve parents and provide greater support for their children. And it should be noted that family involvement is becoming an even stronger element in national policies.

## EARLY INTERVENTIONS

Parent involvement tends to be greater in the early years, and Even Start, Head Start, and the early childhood focus of the Education of Children With Disabilities Act provide opportunities to reach urban, poor young parents early. Moreover, these programs are becoming more family centered. For example, Head Start programs are phasing in

literacy training for parents, and the Even Start program helps families in their homes with ways to prepare their children for school. In addition, the growing family literacy movement emphasizes parents and young children learning together. In particular, elementary schools are becoming sites for multi-services for families. The New Beginnings project in San Diego, for example, registers families for appropriate community services at the same time as the children register for school, and collaborative arrangements among a number of service agencies bring many of the services to the school site.

Sometimes, however, the best results of such interventions require very intensive support. Two pioneer programs demonstrated the benefits of reaching young children early who might otherwise not receive good cognitive stimulation at home, setting the policy and practice frameworks for Federal programs, but they required a major investment in time and personnel. The Milwaukee Project of the mid-1960s and the Abecedarian Project of the early 1970s illustrated that intensive stimulation of very young poor children can lead to higher IQ scores and that it is possible to have good success from such interventions. Ramey and Ramey (1992) noted that among a number of income, social, and educational factors, the mother's level of intelligence is the single strongest predictor of a child's intellectual development. In both of the above projects, the mothers were mentally retarded.

With early intervention through full-week, full-year programs in the Abecedarian Project, all of the children of low-income mothers with IQs below 70 points tested in the normal range of intelligence by the age of three. These early interventions resulted in a 50 percent reduction in the rate of grade retention during the elementary grades. The researchers concluded that in order to promote cognitive development and good attitudes toward learning, young children need adults around them who model good habits of learning. In the Milwaukee Project, the participants were enrolled in an enrichment program for seven hours a day, five days a week, beginning when they were just a few months old and lasting until they reached first grade. They maintained close to normal IQ scores through age 14. However, the children performed lower than their IQ scores might have assumed, but the researchers attributed this to the fact that they were assigned to the lowest academic groups in their classrooms.

## OTHER INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

Because of working or poor parents, and communities which have become fractured or decayed, schools must re-create the "social capital in the community," says Coleman (1991). This means bringing the parents together to agree upon and to enforce norms that support the goals of the school. He warns, however, that a strong body of parents may not always act how the school wants it to act, but will become advocates for the children of the community.

Davies, Burch, and Johnson (1992) say urban elementary schools participating in the League of Schools Reaching Out are redefining themselves as community institutions, responding to the needs of their troubled environments. They use a number of

traditional strategies--open houses, fund-raising fairs, parent conferences, volunteers, intergenerational literacy programs, and advisory and policy councils. They also have developed three new strategies--parent centers; family support programs, such as home visits and parenting workshops; and school and community organization partnerships, with universities, businesses, civic groups, and such.

Goodson, Swartz, and Millsap (1991) say successful family education programs focus on empowering parents. This means they address those factors that alienate parents from the schools, such as low levels of literacy. Other characteristics include:

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- \* provision of multiple levels of parent participation--any contact is seen as positive;
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- \* different modes of contact that respond to different parent skills, e.g., home visits are good for those who lack experience in working in groups;
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- \* helping parents move from one type of involvement to another, e.g., from home visits to school settings;
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- \* sensitivity to the literacy levels of parents;
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- \* flexibility in scheduling and location; and
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- \* use of ways to create closer bonds with families, such as contracts or support groups.

The Willard Model School Parent Center in Norfolk, VA, one of 12 elementary school parent centers, is an example of the range of services this strategy can provide. Parents help select the workshop topics, teachers brief parents at the center every nine weeks on the upcoming curricula, the center provides a game and computer loan library, and its coordinator and teachers visit parents in their homes. During 1990-91, about 80 percent of the parents attended at least one workshop; 71 percent attended two or more. The centers are financed by the school system and Chapter 1.

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS), a program developed by the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning at The Johns Hopkins University, makes homework interactive with parents (Epstein, Jackson, & Salinas, 1992). The program has developed 160 prototype interactive homework assignments linked to the curriculum for Baltimore inner-city middle school teachers. Parents help children with such assignments as oral family histories, science experiments in the kitchen, or reports on health topics.

In Indianapolis, families interact with schools via a local cable channel that broadcasts a homework hotline; children and families can get visual answers to questions about homework assignments (Epstein, 1992). To counteract low attendance at school meetings, some schools are using tape recordings, videocassettes, or answering machines in schools or classrooms which can send and receive timely messages. Others organize volunteer work for parents to do at home or on weekends.

## PROGRAMS FOR MULTILINGUAL FAMILIES

The most promising programs to reach multilingual families do not locate the problem of low literacy support at home with the parents. The National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education asserts that strengthening the achievement of children is a reciprocal one--enabling parents to understand schools while enabling school personnel to understand and take into account how non-English-speaking families view their situation.

While the programs have great variety, they all tend to build on family strengths, emphasize collaboration among early childhood and adult educators, and place value on the families' traditional cultures as well as on the new culture and language. Often, the programs deliberately incorporate a tables-turned aspect--children who are more proficient in English become their parents' teachers. For example, the Pajaro Valley program for Hispanic families in Arizona (Ada, 1988) uses storytelling among parents and children in the native language and in English.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the growing amount of research on parent involvement in high-poverty urban schools and number of practices to choose from, it is too early to say what works in the long-term and why. Iglesias points out that the present parent programs "are a conglomerate of different approaches which differ in their goals, formats, and durations with little or no regard to the interaction of parent characteristics and programs." So far, few programs seem to have produced much reliable knowledge about the special needs of very young parents, and the interventions that both create long-lasting bonds between such parents and their children's schooling and help the parents develop better coping and parenting skills. What does seem clear, however, is that inner-city schools must go beyond traditional strategies that depend on parents' initiatives and see

themselves as educators of families.

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This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062013. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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**Title:** Helping Young Urban Parents Educate Themselves and Their Children.  
ERIC/CUE Digest, Number 85.

**Document Type:** Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

**Available From:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Box 40, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (free).

**Descriptors:** Adult Education, Black Youth, Disadvantaged Youth, Early Parenthood, Economically Disadvantaged, Elementary Secondary Education, Low Income Groups, Minority Groups, Mothers, One Parent Family, Parent Education, Parent Participation, Parent School Relationship, Preschool Education, Urban Problems, Urban Schools, Urban Youth

**Identifiers:** African Americans, ERIC Digests, Language Minorities

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