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Copies of the full report are available at
www.ets.org/familyreport.

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The Family: America's Smallest School



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Highlights

The family and the home are both critical education institutions where children begin learning long before they start school, and where they spend much of their time after they start school. So it stands to reason that improving a child's home environment to make it more conducive to learning is critical if we are to improve the educational achievement of the nation's students and close the achievement gaps. To do this, we need to develop cooperative partnerships in which families are allies in the efforts of teachers and schools. The kinds of family and home conditions that research has found to make a difference in children's cognitive development and school achievement include those highlighted below.¹

The Parent-Pupil Ratio. The percentage of two-parent families has been in long-term decline. Single-parent families are rapidly becoming a significant segment of the country's family population.

- Forty-four percent of births to women under age 30 are out-of-wedlock. The percentage is much higher for Black women and much lower for Asian-American women. While the percentage decreases as women's educational attainment rises, the rate for Black and Hispanic college-educated women remains high.
- Sixty-eight percent of U.S. children live with two parents, a decline from 77 percent in 1980. Only 35 percent of Black children live with two parents. In selected international comparisons, the United States ranks the highest in the percentage of single-parent households, and Japan ranks the lowest.

Family Finances. Income is an important factor in a family's ability to fund the tangible and intangible elements that contribute to making the home an educationally supportive environment. At all income levels, however, parents have important roles to play in facilitating their children's learning, many of which are not dependent upon the availability of money.

- Among racial/ethnic groups, Asian-American families, on average, have the highest median family income; Black families have the lowest.
- On average, White and Asian-American families with children have higher incomes than White and Asian-American families without children. The opposite is true for Black and Hispanic families, however; and these families have much lower average family incomes than their White and

Asian-American counterparts. There are also large differences in family income across the states, ranging from median family incomes in excess of \$70,000 in several northeastern states to less than \$40,000 in New Mexico, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C.

- Nationally, 19 percent of children live in poverty. The percentages increase to nearly a third or more of Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Hispanic children. Among the states, the percentage ranges from a low of 9 percent in New Hampshire to a high of 31 percent in Mississippi.
- Nationally, 11 percent of all households are "food insecure." The rate for female-headed households is triple the rate for married-couple families, and the rate for Black households is triple the rate for White households. One-third or more of poor households are food insecure.
- Rates of parent unemployment are high, and are alarmingly so for some groups. Nationally, one-third of children live in families in which no parent has full-time, year-round employment. This is the case for half of Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native children. More than 40 percent of children in Alaska, New Mexico, Louisiana, and Mississippi live in such families.

Literacy Development. Literacy development begins long before children enter formal education, and is critical to their success in school.

- There are substantial differences in children's measured abilities as they start kindergarten. For example, average mathematics scores for Black and Hispanic children are 21 percent and 19 percent lower, respectively, than the mathematics scores of White children.
- By age 4, the average child in a professional family hears about 20 million more words than the average child in a working-class family, and about 35 million more words than children in welfare families.
- Sixty-two percent of high socioeconomic status (SES) kindergartners are read to every day by their parents, compared to 36 percent of kindergartners in the lowest SES group. White and Asian-American children, those who live with two parents, and children with mothers with higher education levels were also more likely to have a parent read to them

daily than their counterparts who were Black or Hispanic, lived with one parent, or had mothers with lower educational levels.

Child Care Disparities. The availability of high-quality child care is critical when parents work outside the home.

- About half of the nation's 2-year-olds are in some kind of regular, nonparental day care, split among center-based care; home-based, nonrelative care; and home-based relative care. Black children are the most likely to be in day care.
- Overall, 24 percent of U.S. children were in center-based care that was rated as high quality, 66 percent were in medium-quality center-based care, and 9 percent were in low-quality center-based care. Of those in home-based care, 7 percent were in high-quality settings, 57 percent were in medium-quality settings, and 36 percent were in low-quality care. More than half of Black, Hispanic, and poor 2-year-olds were in low-quality home-based care.

The Home as an Educational Resource. The resources available at home — books, magazines, newspapers, a home computer with access to the Internet, a quiet place for study — can have a lasting influence on a child's ability to achieve academically.

- As of 2003, 76 percent of U.S. children had access to a home computer, and 42 percent used the Internet. Black and Hispanic children lagged behind, however.
- Eighty-six percent of U.S. eighth-graders reported having a desk or table where they could study, just above the international average but well below the averages of many countries.
- Thirty-five percent of eighth-graders watch four or more hours of television on an average weekday. Comparisons by race/ethnicity reveal considerable differences in viewing habits: 24 percent of White eighth-graders spend at least four hours in front of a television on a given day, while 59 percent of their Black peers do so.
- A comparison of eighth-graders in 45 countries found that U.S. students spend less time reading books for enjoyment and doing jobs at home than students in the average country participating in the study. On the other hand, U.S. eighth-graders spent more time, on average, watching television and videos, talking with friends, and participating in sports activities. They also spend almost one more hour daily using the Internet.

- One in five students misses three or more days of school a month. Asian-American students have the fewest absences. The United States ranked 25th of 45 countries in students' school attendance.

The Parent-School Relationship. A significant body of research indicates that when parents, teachers, and schools work together to support learning, students do better in school and stay in school longer. Parental involvement in student education includes everything from making sure children do their homework, to attending school functions and parent-teacher conferences, to serving as an advocate for the school, to working in the classroom. How involved are parents in their children's education? Are schools helping to facilitate parental involvement, and doing what they can to effectively partner with parents?

- Since 1996, parents have become increasingly involved in their child's school. However, parent participation decreases as students progress through school, and parents of students earning A averages are more likely to be involved in school functions than the parents of students earning C's and D's.

Putting It Together: Estimating the Impact of Family and Home on Student Achievement.

How closely can stars in this constellation of factors associated with a child's home environment predict student achievement?

- The analysis provided here uses four family/home factors that previous research has shown to be linked to student achievement. To some degree, each is likely to be related to the others: single-parent families, parents reading to young children every day, hours spent watching television, and the frequency of school absences.
- Together, these four factors account for about two-thirds of the large differences among states in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) eighth-grade reading scores.

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The nation has set high goals for raising student achievement. Schools play a critical role in this effort, and it is appropriate that a serious national effort is being made to improve them. However, family characteristics and home environment play critical roles as well. Reaching our ambitious national goals will require serious efforts to address issues on both fronts.

¹ The data highlighted here are drawn from a variety of sources that are referenced in the full report, which is available at www.ets.org/familyreport