

PARENTS', FAMILIES' AND WHĀNAU CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS



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SUMMARY SHEET

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Not all children and young people in New Zealand are reaching their educational potential

Many children and young people in New Zealand achieve high levels of success in education. However we have a long-standing pattern whereby educational achievement is closely correlated with socio-economic status (SES).

It is well-evidenced internationally and in New Zealand that people from lower SES backgrounds tend to have less educational success. Improving our education system so that it supports all our children and young people is important. However we need to think broadly about education as learning and development, including thinking outside existing institutional frameworks. When we do this, we see that an area deserving more attention is the impact parents, families and whānau can have.

The Working Paper *Parents', Families' and Whānau Contributions to Educational Success* describes parenting behaviours and attitudes that have major impacts on children's developmental and educational outcomes, like talking and reading together, positive attitudes to learning and high expectations, and engaging in children's learning in early childhood education and school. Evidence finds that how parents behave is not always linked to their SES (Sylva et al, 2008), and parenting behaviour can mitigate some of the effects of poverty and disadvantage on education success (Dickerson & Popli, 2012; Sylva et al, 2012).

Bringing greater focus to the role of home, parents, caregivers, family and whānau in learning offers an opportunity to better support all New Zealand children to achieve their potential. However it would be unreasonable to expect parents, families and whānau to overcome significant, multiple disadvantages by (for example) reading to their child. To achieve the gains of the scale described in the Working Paper for all our children, we need a range of universal and targeted policies and services.

Strategies and system policy settings can create an environment that enables parents, families and whānau to operate optimally: for example, by providing adequate income, housing and health support. For some parents, caregivers, families and whānau, explicit support to promote their children's learning is also likely to be beneficial.

Why focus on parents, families and whānau?

Most children and young people spend less than half their time in formal education settings. They spend the majority of their time in their homes, with families and whānau, and

in their communities. Parents and whānau are generally among their most stable influences, and "children's early development depends on the health and well-being of their parents" (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p 7).

The effect of the 'home environment' on education success has been found to be larger than inputs such as school and class size, and quality of teaching (Hattie, 2009). An English study found the effect of the 'home learning environment' on primary school achievement to be more powerful than SES or parents' education levels (Sylva et al, 2008). PISA found that 15 year olds whose parents reported that in the first year of school they frequently read to them, talked about things they had done, and wrote letters and words, had an increase in reading performance that was equivalent to more than a year of schooling (Telford, 2012). Longitudinal research has found that parental engagement in primary school is correlated with children's lower high-school dropout rates (Barnard, 2004). A New Zealand study found that students who were high performers at age 14 despite early low income were twice as likely to have had parents who reported expectations that their eight year old would attend university (Wylie & Hipkins, 2006).

Understanding the contribution of parents, families and whānau to children's learning

The Working Paper discusses parents', families' and whānau contributions to children's learning under three headings: parent circumstances, parent investments and behaviours, and parent attitudes and values. Relevant international and New Zealand research is summarised.

Supporting the contribution of parents, families and whānau

Supporting all parents to act in ways that improve their children's learning should be a key goal of communities and Government. An increased focus is needed to best determine how we might generate better outcomes for children by supporting positive parental behaviours, attitudes and values.

A good approach would *start early in a child's life; be strengths-based and recognise the expertise of parents and whānau; build on what is already known to work; and maintain a consistent focus over time.*

Conclusion

Parents, families and whānau contribute some of the factors that lead to educational success, and educational settings and Government policies contribute others. There are therefore powerful opportunities for partnership.

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