

## Chapter 7

### *Benefits of family/parent involvement*

Outcomes of parent involvement programs and practices have been investigated in various contexts and countries across different domains of childhood development and by different variables such as demographic background. After decades of practice and research evidence in different contexts and levels, it has become universally accepted that involving parents has a significant and positive impact on young children's education and development. This chapter presents various studies and findings in the related literature documenting the benefits of parent involvement not only for children but also for teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Globally, research evidence has consistently linked parental involvement in ECEC with children's cognitive and brain development, and socioemotional and physical development. Further, this chapter establishes the link between parental involvement in ECEC and improved children's academic skills in math, science, language, and early reading. Other grounds for rationale such as long-term future life benefits are also delineated.

### Parental involvement academic development

Parent involvement in early childhood has been linked to grounding and improved Science, Technology, Mathematics, and Engineering (STEM) (OECD, 2023; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019; Thomas, et al., 2020). Regarding specific research areas, parental involvement has been found to influence children's development of quantitative skills and problem-solving (Thomas, et al., 2020). It can be asserted that the impacts of parental involvement on grounding STEM or STEAM are said to exist beyond early childhood and across contexts and cultures.

For instance, the 2012 and 2015 studies of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in Croatia, China (Hong Kong and Macao), Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, New Zealand, Portugal, Panama, and Qatar) focused on Science and Math. Findings on survey questions related to parental involvement showed that parental expectations were strongly

associated with children's Math attainments. Further, parental participation in STEM-related activities from the early age up to 10 years was closely associated with their science and Math attainments (OECD, 2013, 2023).



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In Math and Science, the available empirical evidence indicates parental involvement does influence children's attainments in the two subjects (Segrin, et al., 2015; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019; Wong, et al., 2018). To develop Math and Science in early childhood such attributes as competence, autonomy, and problem-solving are vital among children and parents (Silinskas & Kikas, 2019). However, as an important critique, most of the studies with such findings tended to rely on parental-reported data on the scope and frequency of involvement (Dumont et al, 2014; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019).

Recent efforts of grounding parental involvement and science in early childhood have gained the attention of researchers and policymakers globally (Dumont, et al., 2014). There has been a “swing away from science” global concerns due to declining students' interest in natural sciences and related disciplines (Segrin, et al., 2015). One of the effective strategies commonly used to build natural sciences foundational skills and interests is the involvement of parents through various projects and programs (De Silva, Khatibi & Azam, 2018; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019).

On the other hand, in some countries such as Sri Lanka and Tanzania, while there is a huge gap in natural sciences learning achievements across gender, urbanicity, family SES, and even within regions; early childhood parental involvements have been reported to increase, and influence children's interests in these disciplines (De Silva, et al., 2018; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2020). Research has shown that effective parental involvement in such contexts may also take the form of participation in informal STEM activities (Dearing, Sibley, & Nguyen, 2015; Nugent, Barker, Grandgenett, & Welch, 2016).

### Parental involvement and language and early literacy development

Parental involvement is associated with improved early reading skills and even future literacy skills in upper grades (Hemmerechts, Agirdags, & Kavadias, 2017). Regardless of family socioeconomic status, race, or family background, almost all of the parents are said to have been more involved in children's early language and literacy development than any other form of academic development (Hemmerechts, et al, 2017; Tan, Lyu & Peng, 2020). Parental involvement in such activities as story-telling, the naming of common items available in local environments, and storybooks reading with children are claimed to improve children's early reading and literacy skills (Tekin & Tekin, 2006; Tan, et al., 2020). Such parental practices are more nuanced and effective in a context with limited educational resources and lower institutionalized social support (Ejuu, 2022; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022b). Parents in different contexts, for example, in the Gulf countries such as Oman, are also more involved in the process of young children's foreign language, mainly English, learning starting from preschool levels (Tekin, 2014; Tekin, 2015; Tekin & Al-Salmi, 2019)

More to the point, available evidence from the Global South seems to suggest that while such aspects of parental involvement practices as school activities, parent-school regular communications, and parent-child academic discussion are important, in a context with limited educational resources and pervasive family poverty, specific aspects of home-based involvements and parental expectations are extremely vital in enhancing and improving children's early reading and literacy (Dearing et al., 2015; Ejuu, 2022; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022a; Tan, et al., 2020). The reason for these variations is not yet empirically known which calls for more parental involvement research from the Global South.

## Parental involvement and cognitive development

Studies from different parts of the world have documented the connection between parental involvement and young children's cognitive development (Rollè, et al., 2019; Sun, et al., 2018), consistent with language and reading skills (Varghese & Wachen, 2016; Sun, et al., 2018). While there are mixed findings about the implications of distal and proximal factors such as parental education and income on children's cognitive- and early reading development, there is a consensus among ECEC researchers from various contexts that confirm a direct and positive relationship between parental involvement and cognitive development (Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022, Rollè, et al., 2019; Varghese & Wachen, 2016).

In line with the other contexts, the evidence from various countries in the sub-Saharan region has also consistently indicated the existing association between parental involvement and children's cognitive development (Echaune, Ndiku & Sang, 2015; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022). For example, in Kenya, Echaune, Ndiku, and Sang (2015) explored the impacts of parental involvement on early literacy development among preschool and primary school children. They found that while parental involvement in children's homework was correlated with early literacy development, the positive effect disappeared with the control of other variables. Not surprisingly, female parents were more involved than male parents in children's learning and development for socio-cultural reasons.

In India, investigating parental involvement in the cognitive development of children from lower-achieving families, Cashman, Sabates, and Alcott (2021) found that children from wealthier households had more involved parents, which influenced their language skills. This study found that although parental involvement differed across family SES, maternal involvement had significant implications on children's cognitive skills and language development regardless of family SES. Other studies from the US, South East Asian, and South African regions compared maternal and paternal involvements and found that although the mean level of mothers' involvement was higher than fathers', there was a linear association between fathers' involvement and children's cognitive skills (Baker, 2018; Duursma, 2014; Sun, et al., 2018).

On the other hand, a study making use of a large data set from Norway sheds light on the causality of parents' educational levels on children's educational levels (Black, Devereux & Salvanes, 2005). The authors assert that reforms in educational policies in Norway beginning in the 1960s had

a significant impact on higher educational attainment of the population which also led to the capacity to have higher incomes (ibid). In their study, they found little causal relationships between parent education and child education, except for mother and son pairings; that sons get more education when mothers also increase their educational attainment (Black, Devereux & Salvanes, 2005). In some follow-up studies, they have linked this causality to the reform of parental benefits, particularly on the provision of supportive parental leaves connected to giving birth (maternity) as well as to the provision of early childhood care for children (Björklund & Salvanes, 2011). These findings show the power of comprehensive school and policy reforms—that providing support to parents and families has the potential to yield high results for society.

Further, another Norwegian study that focuses on parents' experiences with children's cognitive and language development, particularly of children who have had cochlear implantation, it was found that parent's understanding of learning was key to how they supported their children's learning process but that they are unaware that their involvement had a big impact to the children's cognitive development (Bruin, 2018). Also, this study points to rethinking parents' roles in children's educational development and how parents can be supported by professionals in this role (ibid). On the other hand, the research also points to a debate on how to involve parents in children's pedagogical tasks without reducing parenthood to these activities (ibid).

While there is limited research on parent involvement and academic development among Norwegian researchers in ECEC, there are other studies that include the Norwegian context in their data set. One such research is from Hampden-Thompson et al. (2013) where they undertook a cross-national analysis of parent involvement and student literacy. For this study, they have utilized PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores from 21 countries, Norway being one of them. In general, they have observed that increased communication and engagement with parents come with higher student literacy scores, particularly in reading (Hampden-Thompson et al, 2013). This phenomenon where parent involvement through social and cultural communication benefits students in reading literacy was observed in Norway, Austria, Australia, Finland, and Ireland (ibid).

While we have included this in the literature review, it is important to note that the data set used pertains to school-aged children rather than from the early years. The lack of research in this area could be related

to how the Norwegian Society views early childhood education and care—that the early years are separate from schools and that there is no pressure to “schoolify” kindergartens. As such, there are no subject matter areas in kindergarten pedagogy in Norway; much focus is on children’s rights and well-being, and giving children the opportunity to play, experience nature and the outdoors, and become local and global citizens, which is reflected in the Norwegian Framework for Kindergartens (UDIR, 2017).

### Parental involvement and socioemotional development

Across countries, there is empirical evidence that establishes a relationship between parental involvement in ECEC and children’s social and emotional development (Chavkin, 2017; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022; Saracostti, et al., 2019; Yamauchi, et al., 2017). In Chile, Saracostti, et al. (2019) investigated the impact of parental involvement in children’s socio-emotional development and found a linear relationship between the two factors. However, on learning outcomes, the study found neither mediating nor moderating the role of children’s socio-emotional development. In Norway, Drugli et al. (2009) point out that parental involvement does not work the same for everyone, particularly for parents of children with behavioral differences. For this group, parents with low educational attainment seem to be more vulnerable as they have psychological difficulties to contend with (Drugli et. al., 2009). As such, children who are brought up in these families seem to be at risk of having poor results in children’s development (ibid). The researchers point towards this concern to be investigated further as a target area for research (ibid).

It is important to note the variations of what constitutes children’s socio-emotional development across contexts and cultures, which in turn, have implications for parental involvement. For example, in Uganda one of the roles of parental involvement is to act as children’s first teachers, thus responsible for both personality and culturally appropriate behavioral development, in most of the western societies; parents are to support children develop independence and choice of life pathways that fit their dreams (Selin, 2014).

On the other hand, parental involvement is not always associated with children’s personality and psycho-social development (Wong, et al., 2018). Overinvolved parents or ‘helicopter parents’ who are said to be reluctant to give autonomy and space to their children, have been found to have a

negative impact on their children's learning and development (Schiffrin et al., 2014; Wong, et al., 2018). Findings from various parts of the world have established that such excessive parental control potentially puts children at high risk for behavioral deviation (Schiffrin et al. 2014) and/or low self-esteem (Segrin et al. 2015). In Hong Kong, Wong et al., (2018) examined the educational involvement of parents in their children's academic performance and psychosocial development. These parents were predominantly influenced by Confucius' views which emphasize excessive involvement. Findings indicated that while home-based parental involvement was associated with children's academic performance, it was negatively correlated with psychosocial development.

### Parental involvement and physical development

The importance of parental involvement in children's physical development is two-fold. It includes parents providing children with such needs as food, security, and emotional support at home, and collaboration with schools spanning from such issues as what children eat, play, and physical activities to volunteering (Verjans-Janssen, et al., 2018). In some Western countries, in physical development, parents are mostly involved in school-based programs related to overweight, obesity prevention (Bleich, et al, 2017), nutrition and physical activities, and sedentary behavior (Langford, et al., 2014). In developing countries, on the other hand, parents are mostly involved in school-based programs related to malnutrition, effective parenting, physical activity behavior, and holistic child development (Verjans-Janssen, et al., 2018).

Involvement of parents in young children's physical development is perhaps the leading domain with mixed findings globally (Ackah-Jnr, 2022; Wong, et al., 2018). In Ghana, the involvement of parents in a program related to nutrition, parenting, and learning attainments indicated children's improvements in learning attainments but did not pin their other physical indicators such as MBI and BMI z-score (Ackah-Jnr, 2022). In Hong Kong, Wong et al., (2018) examined the associations of parental educational involvement at home and in school with academic performance, and psychological and physical health of Chinese school children. Results indicated that while parental involvement was positively associated with academic performance, it was slightly associated with psychological health, and has a negative relationship with physical health. These mixed and inconclusive

findings related to the importance of parental involvement suggest conducting more research is needed in this area. In an ethnographic study with a focus on motion in Norwegian youth, parents of children who participated in sports activities were interviewed to shed insight into parent involvement (Stefansen et al., 2018). Parents have pointed out that in their parents were not present and involved in their sports activities in their youth, hence they see parent involvement as important to connect with their children emotionally (ibid). They also believe that their involvement as parents furthers children's development in many ways (Stefansen et al., 2018).



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### Parental involvement and young children's overall wellbeing and rights

Evidence from various longitudinal studies has documented that parental involvement in children's learning and development has implications on their overall well-being (Melhuish et al., 2008; Melhuish, 2010), and is related to children's rights (Coleman, 2019). In their three-year longitudinal study conducted in Zanzibar and the United Kingdom for children aged between three to seven years, Melhuish and colleagues found that parental

involvement was associated with children's academic development as well as linked to increased self-confidence, cooperation, and peer social ability.

Consistent with these findings, some other reports showed that parental involvement in children's development and learning is part of children's rights (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNRC, 1989). For instance, article 30 of the UNRC stipulates that children have the right to have their parents' participation and engagement in various activities in which they (children) are involved. This brings to the fore the importance of various legal and practical frameworks relevant to specific socio-cultural contexts (Pölkki & Vornanen, 2016). For example, while it has been reported that in most non-western contexts' mothers are mostly involved in children's education (Selin, 2014), there is a need to have more fathers and other male figures involved so much so that they serve the child's right obligation.

### Other benefits of parental involvement

Various educational and sociological studies have documented various rationales for parental involvement in children's learning and development (Bigner & Jacobsen, 2020; Cain, 2018; Ejuu, 2022). In most non-western contexts, parental involvement as been associated with future returns, especially during old age care (Ejuu, 2022), and uplifting from intergenerational poverty (Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022b; Wong, et al., 2018).

There are longitudinal studies suggesting that parental involvement during children's early years with future low crime rates and substance abuse (Anwar & Derin, 2019; Garcia, et al., 2017). Using randomized controlled trials, Anwar and Derin (2019) found proportionally reduced crime rates among young adults with parents who had been actively involved in their education than those with parents who were reportedly less involved. The impacts of parental involvement were more nuanced among children from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds who very clearly defined to their children what was morally good and bad.

Further evidence from other parts of the world has also been documented on the different benefits of parental involvement in young children's education, development, and care. For example, in developing countries in the global south, parents are used to having children at young ages when their fertility abilities are high and get involved partly as children's rights (Cain, 2018), and as a strategy to avoid environmental risks such as

infant mortality and development of alternative source of future insurance during old age. However, studies have found a diverging pattern of thinking on the value of children between biologically heterosexual or traditional parents and same-sex parents on the value of children, which in turn influences their views and perception of parental involvement in children's development and learning. Empirical findings have consistently indicated that while there are different motivations for becoming parents, regardless of sexual orientation, all parents get involved in their children's education though for varied, sometimes contradicting reasons (Bigner & Jacobsen, 2020).

### Further empirical evidence on parent involvement in early years

As a research area in ECEC, parental involvement is one of the least researched areas in non-western contexts even though there is mounting evidence about its importance in children's development and learning. This section presents what the research community already knows about family and parental involvement. It presents empirical evidence from both Western and non-Western contexts and cultures.

There is a consensus among ECE researchers, policymakers, and practitioners that parental involvement is associated with improved children's developmental and learning outcomes (Duan, Guan, & Bu, 2018; Sadownik & Skoglund, 2021). It is more critical for children with special learning needs and those from immigrant backgrounds (Sadownik & Skoglund, 2021). Parents who are actively involved in their children's learning are said to promote their socio-emotional development and improved academic growth (Boonk, et al., 2018). Learning activities such as reading at home, school involvement, parental expectations and aspirations, involvement in children's homework, and parental academic pressure have been associated with children's academic success (Boonk et al., 2018; Gubbins & Otero, 2020).

The longitudinal study by Park and Holloway (2017) examined the long-term impact of parental involvement on children's mathematic attainment from preschool to middle grades of elementary schools in the United States of America. Using a sample of a total of 17,385 students from both public and private schools who were followed through Grade 5 and had one or more scores in mathematics. Participating students were assessed on six occasions: Fall and spring of kindergarten, fall and spring of Grade 1, spring

of Grade 3, and spring of Grade 5. Findings indicated that regardless of the kind of schools they attended, parental involvement improved children's academic achievements, boosted parents' and children's networking skills, and was very strongly associated with high mathematic attainments for those from lower family socioeconomic backgrounds.

Some longitudinal studies came up with mixed findings about the role of parental involvement in children's development and learning (Johnson & Hull, 2014; Manolitsis, et al., 2013). For instance, in their longitudinal study to examine the effects of home literacy and numeracy environment on early reading and math acquisition among children in Greece, Manolitsis and colleagues (2013) reported mixed findings. Their study used a sample of 820 children from prekindergarten to the end of grade one. Findings indicated that parental involvement in children's home learning activities was generally correlated with letter knowledge, vocabulary, and phonological awareness, it was not linearly associated with verbal counting.

However, some studies have documented a negative relationship between parental involvement and children's developmental outcomes (See Johnson & Hull, 2014). Such activities as volunteering, fundraising, and even participation in schools' social events were not associated with children's learning outcomes (Johnson & Hull, 2014; Stright & Yeo, 2013). However, some of the investigated traits would have a negative association in one context, but a positive association in another context. For instance, while some studies in the US (Johnson & Hull, 2014; Karbach et al, 2013) found a negative relationship between parental control or interference in children's homework, in China Hsu, et al., (2011) found a positive association between the investigated variables and children's learning outcomes.

In Estonia, Silinskas and Kikas (2019) longitudinally examined associations between children's perceptions of parental involvement in math homework (control and support) and their math performance and motivation (task-persistent homework behavior and math self-concept) from preschool to grade six. The study randomly sampled 512 children who completed math tests, and evaluated their math self-concept; and 420 mothers who evaluated task persistence during homework. Findings indicated that low self-concept in math predicted increased parental control, related to low math performance, task persistence, and math self-concept. Parental support was related to increased task persistence during homework. Over time, parental control was more detrimental to boys' task persistence and math self-concept than for girls.

Other studies have established that parental involvement and learning outcomes are indirectly or directly mediated by children's competencies and characteristics (Phillipson & Phillipson, 2017; You et al., 2016). They list such attributes as children's academic ability and self-evaluation ability and family socioeconomic status (Wang & Sheik-Khalil, 2014). For instance, You and colleagues (2016) studied the relationship between parental involvement and children's academic achievements and self-efficacy in Korea. Findings indicated that while there was a relationship between the observed domains and parental involvements, the improved learning outcomes were the result of children's abilities supported by parental supervision.

While maternal involvement has consistently been linked to children's developmental outcomes, there is mixed evidence about the involvement of fathers (Baker, 2018; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022; Rollè et al., 2019). Baker (2018) examined father involvement in school-related activities such as parent-teacher conferences and regularly attending parent meetings and found that father-school involvement was positively associated with children's reading, math, and teacher-rated approaches to learning scores in pre-primary and elementary school. However, the findings indicated a negative relationship with later developmental outcomes in upper grades or beyond.



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Rollè et al., (2019) conducted a systematic review to examine the existing literature on the association between father involvement and the development of children's cognitive skills during early and middle childhood. Findings indicated the impact of father involvement on children's cognitive skills which was positive and statistically significant. Examining the role of father involvement in children's development of early reading and math, Ndijuye and Tandika (2022) found a significant relationship between father involvement and children's development of such skills. However, the strength of the relationship and the degree of father involvement are still not clearly known and empirically established.

There is evidence that suggests that parental involvement is largely influenced by existing educational policies, laws, and regulations (Tekin, Mikayilova & Muradova, 2021), parental expectations and beliefs (Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022), and the existing socio-cultural contexts (Boonk et al., 2018). In Azerbaijan, parental involvement is regulated by the 2013 State Strategy on Development of Education, which is legally guided by the General Education Law and the Preschool Education Law. The two laws are practically translated into school contexts by the Exemplary Charter of Preschool Educational Institutions (Tekin, et al., 2021).

Social-cultural contexts are one of the significant protective factors that influence parental involvement in early childhood. Available evidence suggests that while parental involvement does not diminish as children grow older, it does change in nature and scope (Boonk et al., 2018; Tekin, 2021), as such, it is not the same across contexts, ethnic groups, and culture. A longitudinal study by You and colleagues (2016), found that while parental participation in school activities, supervision, and expectations had a positive impact on Korean children's development of math and reading, it did not significantly influence their learning attainments when they were in middle school. However, parental involvement had a positive impact on other non-Korean children such as Caucasians and other Asians who were attending the same school registered in the same grade.

Existing empirical research evidence have documented the gap between early childhood education policy and practice on parental involvement (Garvis, et al., 2022; Janssen & Vandebroek, 2018; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022). While most of the existing ECEC policies seem to recognize parental involvement, the developed guidelines and programs seem not to build required partnerships (Janssen & Vandebroek, 2018) but rather list what parents should do (Epstein & Boone, 2022). This leads to the use of various terms such as parent-school partnership, parental involvement, parental

engagements, and parents-school association (Goff & Phillipson, 2022; Epstein, et al., 2019; Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018).

In various contexts, parents have been involved in children's learning and development by playing different roles depending on contextual needs. While in the United Kingdom parents are described in ECEC documents as school partners who create rich home learning environments (Carroll-Meehan, 2022), in Uganda they are involved as children's first teachers through parent-school engagements (Ejuu, 2022). In Singapore, with her tiger parenting, the official stance on parental involvement spans from 'parent engagement' in-home reading and private tutoring programs to 'school-home partnerships' which may involve volunteering at school (Koh-Chua, et al., 2021). This has implications and may define how, when, and the level of involvement parents should be engaged (Garvis, et al., 2022).

While studies across countries have established the potential benefits of parental involvement in children's development and learning, there is reported evidence that indicates that over-involvements have negative implications (Koh-Chua, et al., 2021; McHale, Dinh, Rao, 2014). Parental over-involvement has been associated with such malpractices as interference with already existing school programs (McHale, et al., 2014), and creates a non-working relationship between parents and teachers which reciprocally has negative impacts on children's learning and development (Park & Holloway, 2016).

There are some studies indicating that the over-involvement of parents in children's learning and development has negative psychological and academic impacts (McHale et al., 2014; Park & Holloway). For instance, the famous 'Tiger parenting' style coupled with Confucius-oriented parental beliefs are dominant among the Chinese population which while it is reportedly correlated with academic success, it does not have implications on other domains for holistic child development (Xie & Li, 2018, 2019; Hu, 2022). Equally important, the over-involvement of authoritarian 'Tiger' Chinese parents was associated with less emotional support, limited parent-child emotional attachment, and the possibility of future personality problems (Xie & Li, 2018).