

Homework wars: How can parents improve the odds of winning?

August 19 2010

Children are more likely to do their homework if they see it as an investment, not a chore, according to new research at the University of Michigan.

Most [children](#) in the United States say they expect to go to college, but there is frequently a gap between students' goals and their current behavior, according to the study conducted by U-M graduate student Mesmin Destin and Daphna Oyserman, a psychologist at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR), School of Social Work, and Department of Psychology. The gap can be especially wide among low-income and African American [students](#), the study says.

The study is published in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#).

The researchers conducted two studies among middle-school children in the Detroit area. In the first study, they asked 266 students about the jobs they saw themselves having as adults. "Think about yourself as an adult, what job do you think you'll have? What will you be doing in 10 years?"

Nine out of 10 children expected to attend at least a two-year college, but only 46 percent saw themselves as having an education-dependent adult identity. Those who did invested more time in [homework](#) and got better grades over the course of the school year.

"Even among children with the same starting grades, expecting to be a

teacher, an engineer, or a nurse when you grow up predicts that they'll invest more time in homework," said Oyserman. "And, not surprisingly, they will have better grades over time than children who expect to have a job in sports, entertainment, or other areas that don't depend on having an education."

In the second study, the researchers worked with a group of 295 students and their teachers in science classrooms. The researchers presented information to the students about either the education-dependent earnings of college degree recipients, or about the earnings of actors, musicians, and sports figures.

Then the students answered questions about how they planned to spend their time that evening, and students marked how much time they would spend on homework or studying among other activities such as sports, music, or online activities. After the researchers left the classroom, teachers assigned students an extra-credit assignment relevant to current class material.

Children who saw how adult earnings were related to education were eight times more likely to do the extra credit homework as those who saw the presentation showing adult earnings independent of amount of education.

Taken together, these studies show that a small but powerful intervention showing how much education matters is likely to have a major effect on the likelihood that children will spend time on schoolwork. They are more likely to be seen as an investment in their futures, not a chore that interferes with their lives.

"Our results also inform an ongoing debate about the academic value of athletic participation for low-income and minority youth. Despite apparent benefits for academic achievement and outcomes for more

privileged youth, national survey data do not show that athletic participation has positive effects for urban and minority youth, or female and rural Latino youth. Our results agree with these data.

"We find that very subtle cues can influence academic performance. Failing to see connections between adult identities and current actions puts children at risk of low effort in school. And waiting until low-income and minority children are in high school to make these connections increases the chance they'll already be too far behind to make it to college."

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Homework wars: How can parents improve the odds of winning? (2010, August 19) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-08-homework-wars-parents-odds.html>

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