

Parents and parenting influence childhood cognition – but public policy can help

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Credit: MIKI Yoshihito

In a study of factors that influence childhood cognition in the United States and Great Britain, researchers from North Carolina State University and California State University, Northridge find that the role of parents is more important than far-reaching public policies – but that public policies can make a difference.

"We looked at the effects of parental characteristics on the cognition of [children](#) in the U.S. and Great Britain," says Toby Parcel, a professor of sociology at NC State and corresponding author of a paper on the study. "Basically, we wanted to see whether the welfare state in Great Britain gave its children an advantage.

"Our earlier work looked at children's home environments and behavioral problems across the two [countries](#), and we found that parents were equally important in both places," Parcel says. "In this study we looked at three things: pre-reading skills and scores of reading and mathematics achievement."

For this study, the researchers analyzed two sets of data: a representative sample of 3,439 children between the ages of 5 and 13 in the U.S.; and a representative sample of 1,309 children in Great Britain across the same age range.

"We were able to do this study because the two data sets are comparable – same age range, same timeframe and same measures of key variables," Parcel says.

Overall, the researchers found that parental characteristics were equally important in both countries in supporting stronger child cognition. However, there were some exceptions.

For example, the researchers found that children of single-mother families were at a disadvantage for verbal facility in the U.S., but not in Great Britain. Similarly, they found that a larger [family size](#) was associated with lower [math scores](#) in the U.S., but not in Great Britain.

"This may indicate that parents have fewer resources per child in larger families, and that the government in Great Britain has instituted policies that help compensate for that – whereas those policies are lacking in the

U.S.," Parcel says. "Those policies could possibly include the child allowances and National Health Service, which may help parents use their own resources to better support child cognition."

The researchers also identified many ways in which the U.S. and Great Britain are similar. In both countries, low birth weight, health limitations and larger family size were associated with lower verbal facility. Child health limitations were also linked to lower math scores in both countries, and health limitations, male gender and larger family size were all associated with lower reading achievement in both countries. The mother's cognitive ability and stronger home environments were associated with higher verbal facility, math scores and reading achievement in both countries.

"Parents are equally important in both societies, and policies can't replace good [parents](#)," Parcel says. "But there do appear to be areas where policies can support families and help children succeed."

More information: Toby L. Parcel et al. Can the welfare state replace parents? Children's cognition in the United States and Great Britain, *Social Science Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.10.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.10.009)

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