

Low motivation in parents results in academically unmotivated children

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Whether parental help has positive or negative effects on students' academic outcomes depends on the motivation and involvement of their parents. Results of a study conducted by the Hector Research Institute of

Education Sciences and Psychology suggest that students whose parents are interested in math and perceive their own math competencies to be high perform better than students with parents who show a low interest in math and regard their competencies in the domain as equally low – regardless of the intensity of the help students receive at home. The results have now been published in *Child Development*.

Family background plays a crucial role in the development of students' academic motivation and [achievement](#). Previous research suggested that [parents'](#) academic involvement is, on average, associated with better academic outcomes, but the pattern of results was far from being unequivocal and it also remained unclear what kind of help is actually helpful and what is harmful. For example, excessive parental involvement may be perceived by students as controlling behavior. This can have a detrimental effect on their academic confidence and correspondingly on achievement. Thus, researchers at the University of Tübingen set out to investigate which family characteristics have a positive effect on academic outcomes and which characteristics can be more of a hindrance. To this end, they collected data from more than 1,500 ninth-grade students and their parents.

Parents answered questions on the degree of their academic involvement in [math](#) such as homework help, family math interest, their math competencies, their child's need for support in math, and the time and energy they invest in their child's academic life. Students filled out questionnaires at the beginning as well as five months later, in which they reported on their own competencies, their effort, and their interest in math. In addition, their math grades and their achievement in standardized achievement tests were assessed.

The results confirmed the researchers' assumption that parental involvement per se does not result in higher academic outcomes. Instead, there are very specific family characteristics that promote high

achievement. "A favorable pattern of students' [academic outcomes](#) was found when families were interested in math and perceived their own math competence to be high, regardless of their amount of academic involvement," says Isabelle Häfner, lead author of the study. Thus, it would be problematic to attribute high or low achievement solely to whether parents help students with their homework or not.

The most unfavorable conditions for [academic achievement](#) were found for students from deeply involved families who considered their child needed support in math, showed low levels of [family](#) math interest, and perceived their own math competencies as low. Students from these 'involved but unmotivated' families not only performed poorly in math, but also showed low levels of motivation. "Helicopter moms can impair their child's performance if they are not themselves interested in the subject they want to support their child in," explains Häfner. This complex interplay of favorable and unfavorable factors with regard to students' academic achievement will be investigated in further studies.

More information: Isabelle Häfner et al. The Role of Family Characteristics for Students' Academic Outcomes: A Person-Centered Approach, *Child Development* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12809](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12809)

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