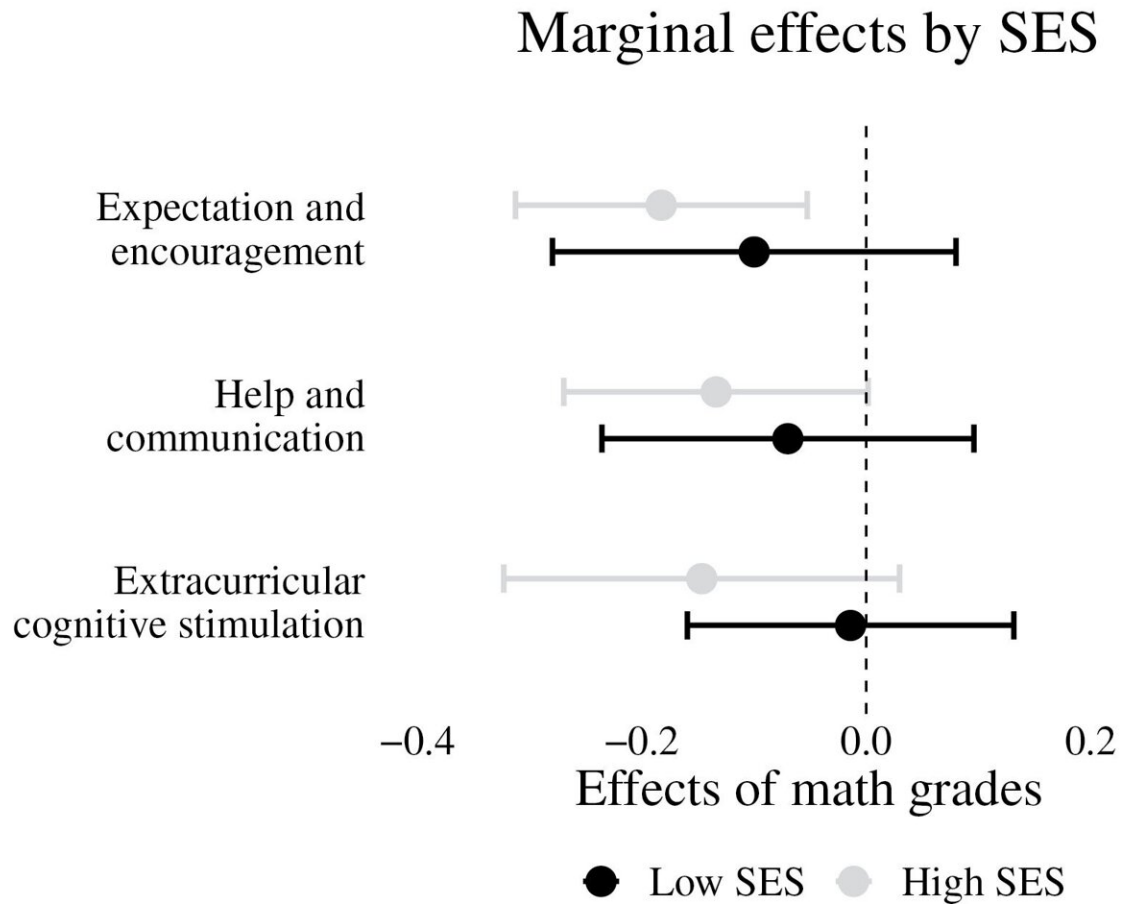


# Do school grades influence parental support?

March 15 2024



Twin fixed-effects coefficients of math grades on parental support (low-SES: ISCED 1-4, 5B; high-SES: ISCED 5A, 6). Credit: *European Sociological Review* (2024). DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcae010

The Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) has

researched parents' support behavior in relation to school grades. The study shows that low-income families support their children equally regardless of grades, while parents from higher-income groups tend to give more support to children with lower grades.

It also raises the question of whether these patterns contribute to low social mobility, as parents of high-achieving children from lower social classes do not have the same resources and strategies at their disposal as parents of low-achieving children from higher social classes.

Whether a child brings home good or poor grades may influence the extent to which parents support their children. Much of the research to date has assumed that parents with a higher socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to support the child with poorer grades than the child with good grades.

In low SES families, on the other hand, it has been assumed that only children with the best chances of academic success are supported. A recent study by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR), however, does not find support for this theory, at least in families with lower incomes.

Philipp Dierker, a Ph.D. student at the MPIDR and the University of Helsinki, along with his co-author Martin Diewald (Bielefeld University), used data from the German [TwinLife](#) study to investigate how parents' behavior towards their children changes as a function of academic performance.

"Unlike previous research, we did not focus on children's cognitive abilities, but instead, we looked at how parents support their children depending on how well they perform academically by evaluating parents' reactions to their children's school grades," explains Dierker.

## **Twin pairs serve as a data set**

Data from the first three surveys of the TwinLife study were used in the research. The results of the cohorts born in 2003 and 2004 were analyzed for both identical and fraternal same-sex twins. At the time of the first survey, the children were, on average, 11 years old. By the third interview, they were, on average, 13 years old.

"It is particularly valuable that the children were asked directly about the kind of support they received from their parents. In this way, we could rule out the possibility that parents are exaggerating their own support for their children so as not to appear to be neglecting their children," says Dierker. Specifically, the students were asked how their parents supported them in the following areas:

- With homework and communication with school
- Encouragement and expectations
- Encouraging cognitive development (e.g., by reading or making music together)

Over three surveys; the researchers assessed how these three forms of support changed in relation to school performance. "The study of [twin pairs](#) does have some potential limitations. For example, there may be systematic differences in how parents of twins and parents of non-twins interact with their children."

"Previous research, however, has not established that twins are treated differently than siblings by their immediate family, so we believe that our results are generalizable beyond twin families," Dierker explains.

## **One parent group supports both children equally**

"We conclude from our results that parents in families with a lower socio-economic status do not make any distinction when it comes to supporting their children. Our study reverses the assumption that families with a lower social status only support children with the best chances of advancement," says the Rostock researcher.

However, the research does show that in families with a higher socio-economic status, parents do, in fact, provide more support for the child with poorer grades. This may be because of a fear of social decline, which is a stronger motivator in families with a higher social status.

"Here we see more help with homework and communication with the school, and more expectations and encouragement. We assume that highly educated parents also try to encourage their possibly less gifted child through forms of support that are not directly aimed at promoting cognitive skills". Without future surveys, this study cannot show whether this support is effective and whether these efforts are successful.

## **Influence on social mobility**

These studies are important additions to the study of social mobility.

"High-achieving children from lower social classes do not have the same resources, networks, and support as children from higher social classes who are protected from social decline by their parents. The question remains to what extent these differences in parental [support](#) contribute to low social mobility for the next generation," says Dierker.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *European Sociological Review*.

**More information:** Philipp Dierker et al, Compensation or accentuation? How parents from different social backgrounds decide to

support their children, *European Sociological Review* (2024). DOI: [10.1093/esr/jcae010](https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcae010)

Provided by Max Planck Society

Citation: Do school grades influence parental support? (2024, March 15) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-school-grades-parental.html>

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