



Helping Parents Get a College Education Helps Children Succeed

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When a parent walks onto the stage on graduation day, she is not walking alone. She brings her children along – whether they join her on stage or not. As she reaches for her degree she is also reaching for better employment, higher earnings, and greater stability for her family. In helping children escape the harms of poverty, nothing is more effective than supporting their parents' college success.

Higher Education is the Pathway out of Poverty

A college degree has a major impact on a family's economic stability, particularly for families headed by women. College graduates are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to find new employment than those without college degrees. College graduates are also more likely to have a pension and health insurance, thus avoiding public programs. Over the course of a lifetime of work, women with a baccalaureate degree will earn over \$800,000 more than those with only a high school diploma; community college degree holders will earn at least \$400,000 more.

Recent research confirms, however, that a child born into a poor family is six times less likely to earn a college degree than one born into a higher-income family. And while close to half of those who do not graduate from college remain poor – of the poor children who attain a degree, only 10% remain poor.

The positive impact of a parent's college education on their child's social and economic mobility is particularly pronounced among families in the bottom fifth of the economic spectrum. When a child from this group is young, a \$3,000 difference in their parents' annual income is associated with a 17% increase in the child's future earnings. A relatively small increase in household income has significant and lasting impact on a child's life. A college degree can help boost a parent's earnings today and trigger the associated increase in their child's earnings for the future.

Do Childhood Outcomes Correlate with Parents' College Education?

Research confirms that the most important factor in predicting a child's educational attainment is how far in school their parents progressed. Children from families with a college graduate fare much better than children from families without. Numerous studies conclude that "one of the most powerful – and disturbing – trends in American higher education is the tendency of educational attainment to reproduce itself, with the children of those who graduated from college much more likely to graduate themselves than those whose parents did not."

The Education Longitudinal Study began tracking a cohort of 15,000 U.S. high school sophomores in 2002 to follow their academic achievement, college entry, work history, and college graduation. Thirteen years later, just 14% of the participants from low-income families had earned a bachelor's degree, while 60% of those from higher-income families had earned a bachelor's degree.

A recent poll found that the choices young people make as they complete high school resonate throughout their lives. Parental education level shapes these key expectations and experiences: 76% of those with two college educated parents entered a two- or four-year college immediately after high school, double the 37% of those from no-degree families. In the end, 55% of all children from two-degree families obtained a college or postgraduate degree, as compared with just 23% of children from no-degree families.

European researchers have shown that the positive effects of parental education can be seen as early as age 4 and persist through graduation. Comparing the effects of parental education, socio-economic status, and income over the life course, the same researchers confirm that parental education matters, with maternal education having its strongest effect in early childhood, especially on cognitive development and the associated long-term benefits.

A University of Michigan study revealed that higher levels of parental education led to higher levels of educational aspirations or educational attainment in adolescence, and subsequently, to higher educational attainment or more advanced occupational status in adulthood. The study suggests that the beneficial effects of parental education are not limited to academic achievement but have long-term implications for positive outcomes into middle adulthood.

Parents who completed or are obtaining a college degree are essential role models for their children. They provide a higher bar for their children's aspirations, the confidence and encouragement their children need to pursue a college education, and the knowledge required to navigate the college application processes. Furthermore, college educated parents are also better equipped to help their children build vocabularies, complete their homework, study for tests, and advocate for themselves in school. Children with this kind of parental support are also strongly incentivized to seek advancement for themselves.

What Does It Take to Support Parents in College?

A college education is the surest pathway out of poverty, especially as most new jobs require that applicants have a college degree just to get in the door. Many low-income parents understand this and take on the responsibility of college on top of work and family. Yet, research has found that *more than half of the parents who enter college leave without completing their degree*. Given the profound gains that come with parents' college success, how can the community support parents in college?

Low-income parents are juggling work, children's needs, and college. Support for these families is essential for family stability, and should include extensions of childcare subsidies; family income supplements to ensure adequate nutrition, heat, housing and transportation; work-study funds; and on-campus mentors. Helping parents in college is a "cost-effective strategy for raising the educational attainment of two generations simultaneously, while narrowing educational disparities."

When young people watch their parents cross the stage and take hold of a college degree, they see their future. What could be more valuable than making sure that day arrives?

