



# Doing homework together: The relation between parenting strategies, child engagement, and achievement



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## ABSTRACT

This study of 61 elementary school children examined how maternal behavior and child engagement in a homework-like task relate to reading achievement, and whether task engagement mediates the relation between parenting and reading achievement. Maternal behaviors and task engagement were examined using videotaped observations of mother-child interaction during a homework-like task. Children participated in reading achievement testing, and schools provided reading/language arts grades. Children who displayed higher task engagement performed better on measures of reading achievement. Maternal support for autonomy predicted reading achievement, even controlling for support for relatedness and competence. In addition, support for autonomy was a significant predictor of child task engagement, controlling for the other parenting variables. Task engagement partially mediated the relation between support for autonomy and reading achievement. This research points to the importance of child engagement as a potential mechanism for academic success, and to the ability of parents to foster engagement and achievement.

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## 1. Introduction

Parental assistance with homework is common in elementary school (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008) and an opportunity for parents to support the development of academic skills. At its best, homework is thought to support children's academic learning, increase feelings of self-efficacy and motivation, promote strong study habits, and encourage independent problem-solving; at its worst, homework has the potential to erode motivation, decrease interest in academic subjects, and generate parent-child conflict (For a review, see Cooper, Steenbergen-Hu, & Dent, 2012). Mixed findings regarding the impact of parent homework involvement on children's achievement may be in part due to variability in *how* parents provide assistance (Patall et al., 2008). Cooper et al. (2012) noted that, with respect to homework, "the type and quality of parent involvement may be critical to its effects, and these vary among parents in ways that current research only hints at" (p. 490).

While there is a large literature documenting the connection between parenting, parental involvement, and children's academic achievement (e.g., Hill & Wang, 2015; Izzo, Weisberg, Kaspro, & Fendrich, 1999; McGill, Hughes, Alicea, & Way, 2012; Monti, Pomerantz, & Roisman, 2014; Turner & Johnson, 2003), little research has focused on understanding parenting in the specific context of homework interactions and its relation to achievement. At present, few studies have utilized observational homework-like tasks (i.e., homework tasks assigned in the context of a research study) to examine how parent-child interactions relate to children's academic functioning. Existing studies have focused on mathematics homework versus language arts and included limited assessment of academic competence (Else-Quest, Hyde, & Hejmadi, 2008; Mattanah, Pratt, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005). The present study examines parenting and child engagement during a language arts homework-like task to determine how these parent-child interactions relate to reading achievement. The term engagement refers to the child's behavioral, cognitive, and emotional indicators of involvement in the homework-like task.

1.1. Importance of the developmental period of middle childhood

### 1.1. Importance of the developmental period of middle childhood

Middle childhood is an ideal time to investigate children's experience of homework interactions; it represents a critical period for the development of academic skills that warrants additional empirical focus. For example, Feinstein and Byner (2004) found that cognitive development between ages 5 and 10 predicted adult academic achievement, above and beyond earlier development. Research on parent influences

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on academic success during this time period is scarce relative to early childhood and adolescent research, despite empirical evidence for the importance of contextual factors generally, and parenting specifically, during this developmental period (e.g., Magnuson, Duncan, & Kalil, 2006; Murray, 2012). Elementary school children are developing greater independence, but parents still serve as a key influence, both in supporting their academic work and in facilitating the transition to greater academic autonomy, making this an important developmental period for research on parent-child interactions related to learning.

### 1.2. Self-determination theory as applied to learning

Self-determination theory (SDT) has been applied to understand how children approach learning situations, and it provides an appropriate lens to consider parent-child homework interactions. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002) uses a humanistic perspective to highlight the critical role of parents in meeting children's needs in order to foster independence in learning and intrinsic motivation. SDT emphasizes the importance of contexts supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which, in turn support the intrinsic motivation underlying learning. The need for autonomy is related to feelings of control, while the need for competence is related to feelings of effectiveness and mastery; these needs, when fulfilled, serve as a source of intrinsic motivation. Finally, the need for relatedness focuses on feelings of connection with others, self-worth, and acceptance to create a context which nurtures learning. Research on SDT with adolescents suggests that children's engagement plays a critical role in learning (Katz, Kaplan, & Buzukashvily, 2011; Katz, Kaplan, & Gueta, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2013). Specifically, when children are given autonomy-supportive versus controlling contexts for learning, they can actively initiate their own self-discovery and problem-solving. However, a limitation of SDT research is that it has focused mainly on middle class, Caucasian adolescent samples. Research is needed on parent-child homework interactions with racial and ethnic minority elementary school children to investigate the connection between parenting and achievement, as well as the role of engagement in learning interactions, during this unique developmental period. Below we discuss research on how each component of SDT theory relates to children's achievement and engagement.

### 1.3. Supporting autonomy

Support for autonomy describes the ability of parents to guide children's participation in learning activities by tailoring adequate levels of support to the child without over-control or interference. Support for autonomy includes encouraging child initiative to solve problems, providing opportunities for active involvement in activities, allowing choices, and using suggestions and prompts to support children's efforts. In contrast, parents can take a controlling approach to problem-solving (i.e., directing children's behavior, solving problems for them), resulting in fewer opportunities for child engagement and guided self-discovery (e.g., Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Grolnick, Gurland, DeCoursey, & Jacob, 2002).

The existing literature documents the potential of support for autonomy to facilitate children's achievement, while excessive parental control can decrease autonomous motivation, self-regulation, and academic performance (for reviews, see Grolnick, 2003; Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005). Autonomy support has been associated with higher standardized test scores and grades, as well as engagement (Boveja, 1998; Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Leung & Kiran, 1998; Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). Mattanah et al. (2005) found that maternal support for autonomy in elementary school predicted both academic and social indices of achievement beyond the impact of maternal warmth and structure. However, investigations of support for autonomy have relied upon parent and child self-report, with fewer studies utilizing observational methods (e.g., Deci, Driver, Hotchkiss, Robbins, & Wilson, 1993).

### 1.4. Supporting relatedness

Acceptance, encouragement, responsiveness, and sensitivity support a child's psychological need for relatedness, while hostility and criticism can undermine this psychological need (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). During the preschool period, Richman and Rescorla (1995) found that parental warmth, based on parent self-report, was highly related to children's perceived competence and social acceptance, but not to academic achievement. In contrast, researchers using observational methodology have found associations between support for relatedness with children's cognitive and academic performance (e.g., Estrada, Arsenio, Hess, & Holloway, 1987; Hill, 2001). In an observational study of a homework-like mathematics task with elementary school children, maternal positive emotion predicted children's mathematical competence on the task (Else-Quest et al., 2008). Further research on support for relatedness is needed in the context of homework interactions to examine the relation with children's engagement and achievement. Only self-report studies have examined how constructs such as parental affect relate to children's literacy homework experiences and achievement (Pomerantz, Wang, & Ng, 2005).

### 1.5. Supporting competence

Adults can support the need for competence by providing learning challenges and opportunities, as well as feedback and strategies to promote efficacy and mastery (Curby et al., 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Two components of effective instructional support are the use of instructional discussions to support higher order thinking rather than rote or fact-based learning, and provision of high quality feedback that focuses on learning and understanding rather than the accuracy of the response or the final product (La Paro et al., 2009). For instance, Silinskas, Niemi, Lerkkanen, and Nurmi (2013) found that for children with reading difficulties, frequency of teaching in the context of parent positive affect was associated with growth in children's reading skills; however, this work relied on parent report and did not consider the quality of the support for competence parents provided. In the case of the classroom, observational research supports links between high quality instructional support and both academic achievement and engagement (Curby et al., 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008; Rimm-Kaufman, Baroody, Larsen, Curby, & Abry, 2015). Understanding more about these interactions, particularly in the context of a homework-like task, may help parents avoid negative cycles that exacerbate children's difficulties and promote conflict.

### 1.6. Child engagement in learning interactions

Too little is known about the mechanisms in these links between parenting and achievement, but children's engagement in learning may be a key component of this relation. Engagement is understood as a malleable construct with behavioral, cognitive and emotional elements (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral aspects of engagement include quality of participation, persistence, and effort, while the cognitive and emotional aspects include interest, enjoyment, motivation, and attention (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Eccles, 2004; Fredricks et al., 2004; Ladd & Dinella, 2009).

Initial evidence with largely adolescent samples suggests that parenting practices influence adolescents' academic engagement, and engagement predicts achievement, with higher achievement fostering further engagement (Chen, 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Parents who display interest in children's educational pursuits, and provide high support for relatedness, tend to have children who show higher levels of engagement, though research in this area is limited (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Lowe & Dotterer, 2013). In addition, observed teacher support for autonomy predicts child engagement (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Child engagement may serve as an important mechanism in the connection between

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