

Improving mothers' literacy skills may be best way to boost children's achievement

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Researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health concluded that programs to boost the academic achievement of children from low income neighborhoods might be more successful if they also provided adult literacy education to parents.

The researchers based this conclusion on their finding that a mother's reading skill is the greatest determinant of her [children's](#) future academic success, outweighing other factors, such as neighborhood and family income.

The analysis, performed by Narayan Sastry, Ph.D., of the University of Michigan, and Anne R. Pebley, Ph.D., of the University of California, Los Angeles, examined data on more than 3,000 families.

The study, appearing in *Demography*, was supported by NIH's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

"The findings indicate that programs to improve maternal literacy skills may provide an effective means to overcome the disparity in [academic achievement](#) between children in poor and affluent neighborhoods," said Rebecca Clark, Ph.D., chief of the Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch at the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the NIH institute that funded the study.

After mother's reading level, neighborhood income level was the largest determinant of children's academic achievement.

The researchers undertook the study to isolate factors contributing to the disparity in academic achievement that other studies have found between children in low income and affluent neighborhoods.

Sastry and Pebley's analysis was based on data collected between April 2000 and December 2001 as part of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey, an ongoing examination of families in 65 LA county communities. The information included the results of reading and math assessments of 2,350 children ages 3 to 17, their mothers' education level, census records of neighborhood income, and family income and assets. The participants in the study were representative of the larger Los Angeles community.

Sastry and Pebley noted that neighborhood income had the largest impact on achievement for children ages 8 to 17, who are at the middle and higher end of the age range. This is consistent with the idea that the environment outside the home becomes more important as children grow older, they said.

"This analysis gives us a chance to isolate the different factors that affect children's achievement," Dr. Sastry said. "Policy measures to encourage mixed-income neighborhoods, improve early childhood education, and build mothers' reading skills each could have positive effects on children's achievement scores."

Provided by National Institutes of Health

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