

Sensitive parenting can boost premature children's school performance

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Sensitive parenting helps protect against the negative effects of being born prematurely on children's school success, a new study has found.

Children born prematurely are at risk of a variety of neurological impairments which can mean they are more likely to need special [educational support](#) when they reach school age.

But a new study led by the University of Warwick shows that parents of very preterm and very low birthweight (VP/VLBW) children can increase their child's [academic achievement](#) through sensitive and cognitively stimulating parenting.

Researchers looked at [parenting styles](#) of parents of children aged 6 to see what effect they had on those children's school success when they reached the age of 13.

The study found that highly sensitive parenting at age 6 boosted the academic performance of VP/VLBW children when they reached 13 to levels similar to full-term children. A parallel increase was not seen for full-term children.

However, the results also showed that more cognitively stimulating early home environments benefit all children's long-term school success, regardless of whether they were premature or not.

Professor Dieter Wolke of University of Warwick said: "By sensitive

parenting, we mean adapting one's parenting to the individual child's behaviour and responses, while clearly remaining the more competent partner and setting age appropriate limits."

"So for example providing gentle feedback and suggesting potential solutions rather than taking over and solving the tasks for the child.

"Cognitively stimulating parenting is where parents include activities designed to get children thinking such as reading to them or doing puzzles together.

"We found that both these styles of parenting have a positive effect in increasing [school performance](#), with sensitive parenting particularly effective at closing the [gap](#) in achievement between preterm and low birth-weight children and their full-term counterparts."

The study, Effects of Sensitive Parenting on the Academic Resilience of Very Preterm and Very Low Birth Weight Adolescents was published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

The researchers sought to clear up uncertainty among the scientific community about whether parenting has an influence on academic achievement of preterm children.

They looked at two groups of German children – 314 very preterm/very [low birth weight](#) children and a control group of 338 full-term children.

They were studied from birth to age 13, with the researchers analysing socioeconomic status, neurological and physical impairment at age 20 months and levels of parental sensitive and cognitive stimulation at age 6 years. School success was measured from six to 13 years of age.

The study defined very preterm as babies born at less than 32 weeks

gestation or weighing less than 1500g (3lb 5 oz).

The researchers found that the 15 per cent of highly sensitive parents within the VP/VLBW group had children whose academic performance at 13 years was similar to the full-term children.

In contrast, parents of VP/VLBW children who showed low sensitivity had children who required more special educational help and had more schooling problems.

Maternal sensitivity made little difference to the grades or academic performance of full-term children, who were much less susceptible to parenting differences.

The research found that cognitively stimulating parenting raised [academic performance](#) across both groups of children.

Professor Wolke said: "The results suggest that sensitive parenting boosts children's self-control and attention regulation, which are important for school success.

"We would like to see increased investment in programmes that equip parents of VP/VLBW with the skills needed to provide appropriate and sensitive support to their [children](#)."

Provided by University of Warwick

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