Welcome to our second issue of The Developmental and Motivation Research Laboratory Newsletter! The entire team at the research lab has been working very hard in the past few months to continue the work on the STEM and School Engagement studies that were highlighted in the previous issue.

In this issue, we switch gears to talk about some of the most important influences on student academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being—parents. Research tells us that parental involvement is indispensable in the present and future success of any child. Nevertheless, the issue of parental involvement is a complex one that must be studied from various perspectives, and this is precisely what we tried to do in this issue.

We began by explaining the meaning of academic socialization and the way in which parental involvement evolves alongside the growth of the child. We then turn to the mental health aspect of parental involvement and how parental warmth comes into play for students’ well-being.

Then, we offer tips for parents and teachers in hopes of fostering better parent-teacher communication. Additionally, we tackle the unique issues that parents of color and their children face in academic settings and how this impacts the parental involvement of these families.

Lastly, we highlight 2 school districts that have been amazing partners in our research and a special person at the lab that we feel has really distinguished themselves in the past few months.

Here at the lab, we recognize the importance of parents in the lives of all students. So, as a final word we’d just like to give a big thank you to all those parents who work hard and struggle daily in order to ensure the future success of every child. Your work is priceless, and we honor you!

Academic socialization is the term educational researchers apply to the concept of speaking explicitly to adolescents about the positive life consequences of education. It means helping students form short-term and long-term goals in order to link the present to the future. Research demonstrates that teens who are academically socialized at home have more academic success than their non-academically socialized peers. What’s more, academic socialization has been shown to align positively with the emotional and mental well-being of youth. Young people need structure, but they also need autonomy; academic socialization satisfies both of these needs. When compared to parental involvement at home and at school, academic socialization is more effective in helping adolescents prepare for their future. When adults place a high value upon education, there is a strong chance that teens will do the same, and there is no place to start like home.
Parental Involvement and Its Many (Changing) Forms

Parental involvement comes in many forms. In elementary school, parents have many opportunities to get involved in their child’s life at school. From “homeroom moms” to field trip chaperones, parents are often a visible and indispensable cog in the early academia machine. Holiday parties wouldn’t be the same without Johnny’s mother’s famous cookies and the basketball team wouldn’t have afforded those new jerseys if it weren’t for the efforts of the 4th grade dads at the concession stand. Agenda books and planners are often used as a primary source of communication between home and school; parents are required to sign off to ensure that all of their child’s assignments are being done. Weekly calendars get sent out by the elementary school teacher filling parents in on all the things that are happening in their child’s classroom; then comes middle school.

Suddenly, students have more than one teacher for all of their core subjects and the student work-load begins to rise. As teachers gain more students, their capacity for home/school communication lessens, and parents are often left wondering what it is exactly that their child is learning at school.

The student transitions into high school and gone are the days of “homeroom moms” and field trip chaperones. Often times, the first communication that happens between home and school occurs when the student gets in trouble or brings home an unsatisfactory report card. Some teachers do send letters home, but parents are lucky if their teen hasn’t lost it and remembers to hand it in.

In this wild whirlwind of happenings, parents may find it hard to stay involved in their child’s academic life. The older they get, the more teens feel the need for more autonomy and independence, so homework help from parents often goes by the wayside (even when the child might need it). Parents often begin to assume that no news from school is good news and accept their teen’s vague answers of “school is good”.

Nevertheless, more and more studies show that staying involved in children’s lives throughout secondary school is essential for their academic success and emotional well-being. The trick is to match the type of parental involvement to the adolescent’s needs.

In secondary school, parental involvement may take the shape of helping youth form goals and monitoring youth behavior in the context of their aspirations. Providing adolescents with a warm and supportive home environment where they are allowed a significant level of independence may also empower students to stay on track toward meeting their goals. Teens often have difficulty seeing how their present links to their future, and this is where parents come into the picture. Speaking directly to young people about the importance of education and the positive impact that academic success will have on their future life may be just the form of parental involve-
Parents, Bring on that Warmth!

The demonstration of what researchers call “parental warmth” influences children’s lives in a positive way. Studies have shown that it may not be enough for students to simply go to school and hear about the benefits of education or even have parents that are involved in their children’s academic lives. Parental warmth, needed as an underlying buffer for both academic socialization and parental school involvement to be effective, is emotional supportiveness. A recent study showed that parents who exhibited warmth and care toward their children were better able to handle the conflicts that exist in nearly every parent-adolescent relationship and direct their child’s behavior toward a path of academic success. Parental warmth balances a strong emotional connection between the parent and the child with a structured home environment that supports the adolescent’s developmental need for independence and self-expression. Regulating teen behavior and enforcing rules becomes much easier in a parent-adolescent relationship wrapped in parental warmth. Researchers inferred that adolescents interpret structure less as an infringement on their need for freedom, independence, and expression and more as a sign of support and care when parents exhibit parental warmth. Furthermore, the adolescents whose parents show parental warmth are more likely to take on and internalize parental values. So, parents, next time you feel a cold front coming from the direction of your teen, just stop, take a deep breath, and bring on that warmth!

Help Your Teen Battle Depression—Stay Involved!

Is your teen happy? More often than not, the answer to that question is that it’s hard to tell. One day, they’re on cloud nine chattering away about everything that’s been happening at school, while the next day they’re withdrawn and sullen, barely acknowledging your presence. Some days, you might be left wondering if the same kid who walked through the door yesterday is the same kid who walked through the door today.

Well, don’t be too discouraged. As many parents already know, adolescence is a time of developing hormones, emotional turmoil, and flourishing self-expression. Kids are beginning to resemble the very “young adults” that they are, and they start searching for self-identification. As teens embark on the journey of adolescence, their list of responsibilities and social pressures begins to grow. Included on this list is the pressure to succeed in school.

Since adolescents’ measure of success at school is often tied to their notion of self-worth, it becomes extremely important for parents to stay involved in their child’s academic life. This involvement might include positive school/home communication, keeping track of students’ academic performance, and speaking explicitly about the importance of education for a happy, success-filled life.

Parents must avoid falling into the trap of disengaging from their children’s lives at school, for if the child starts to fall behind in their academics, it does not bode well for their self-esteem, which can, in turn, lead to further academic decline. Staying out of this cycle of depression is a must, and one way to do it is by staying involved in children’s academic lives. When parents value education, it begins to rub off on teens, and they become more engaged in school, feel more support at home, and
Ten Tips for Parents

Parents, let’s consider specific guidelines to help you communicate effectively with your child’s teacher in preparation for parent-teacher conferences. Practice these guidelines, and your child will reap the benefits.

1. Identify and communicate the purpose for the parent-teacher conference.
2. Arrange the conference at the teacher’s convenience.
3. Plan for the conference with specific questions and topics you want to cover.
4. Display a positive attitude during the conference (tone of voice, facial expression, and body movements).
5. Remain open and supportive throughout the conference instead of antagonistic or defensive.
6. Make sure the teacher provides suggestions for increasing your child’s growth in the classroom.
7. Ask for examples of daily work to better understand your child’s strengths and weaknesses.
8. Clarify and summarize each important point as it is discussed to ensure that you and the teacher are on the same page.
9. Make sure you understand the information the teacher is supplying (including educational jargon), and if you don’t understand, ask.
10. Keep conferences relatively short (no more than 40 minutes), and set up another conference if more needs to be accomplished.

Source:

Ten Tips for Teachers

Teachers, in your busy day of juggling papers, lesson planning and managing all of your students, it is easy to forget about the group of people that could lend you significant support in your charge as teachers -- parents and families. Consider these tips for improving connections with this valuable group:

1. Smile when you see parents and learn their names.
2. Communicate often and in various forms.
3. Make a positive phone call home.
4. Lead with the good news.
5. Find a translator (if needed).
6. Ask questions about the child and listen.
7. Let parents know how they can help, and be specific with your needs.
8. Explain your instructional decisions, and invite parents to participate in making some decisions.
9. Thank parents.
10. Share students’ every success.

Source:
A Delicate Balance: African-American Parenting and Academic Involvement

Research shows that minority students are more likely to fall behind in academic performance and school engagement during their secondary school years than their non-minority peers. For this reason, parental support and involvement is vital for minority students such as African-Americans, to succeed. Studies demonstrate that parents tend to modify their involvement in their child’s school life based on their child’s academic performance. More often than not, when students do well, parents give their children more independence, while when children are not measuring up to expectations, parents tend to stay more involved.

When it comes to school involvement for African-American parents, however, there is a delicate balance that must be struck between negotiating mistrust of the educational system due to a history of discrimination (that, for some, still continues to this day) and staying on track with their children’s education. In fact, some studies have shown that African-American parents tend to stay more involved in their children’s lives at home than at school compared to European-American parents. It has also been shown that African-American parents tend to be stricter and more “no-nonsense” in their parenting styles than European-American parents. This results in a lower development of independence, but it does promote the highest academic success for African-American youth when compared to other parenting techniques.

Researchers speculate that African-American parenting strategies are a consequence of the often tough, less economically stable communities where many African-American children are raised. As a natural result of the high risk of danger in many low-socioeconomic neighborhoods, African-American parents’ vigilance for their children’s well-being at home remains high. Research also demonstrates that African-American parents are very aware of the high cost of their children making mistakes in school and outside of school. In fact, this may be one of the driving forces of why high levels of school involvement by African-American parents plays such a pivotal role in success of African-American youth.

In order to be effective, however, this involvement must evolve alongside the growth of the child. Volunteering at school events and offering homework help the way many parents do in elementary school is not as effective when children transition to middle school and high school. Parental involvement in high school is most effective when it includes regular, clear communication with schools. This communication should be proactive, meaning it prevents school decline, rather than initiated only when academic slumps occur. Effective African-American parental involvement also involves having a warm, caring relationship with the child and a structured home environment where academic success is valued and talked about often.

With many societal phenomena, like racial discrimination, low socio-economic background, and neighborhood violence riding against the chances of success for African-American youth, it is more important than ever for African-American parents to take over the reins and steer their children towards high academic achievement and the realization of their children’s fullest potential.
Research Article Spotlight:
“Parental Racial Socialization as a Moderator of the Effects of Racial Discrimination on Educational Success Among African American Adolescents”

In the article “Parental Racial Socialization as a Moderator of the effects of Racial Discrimination on Educational Success Among African American Adolescents”, Drs. Ming-Te Wang and James P. Huguley explore the question: Is it possible for parents to off-set the negative impact that racial prejudice might have on their children? The data shows that it can.

African American youth grow up with the harsh reality of racial discrimination as a part of their daily lives. Not surprisingly, many psychological studies have shown that this impacts young African Americans in a negative way, especially males. Wang and Huguley’s study suggests that parents who are racially socialized, meaning parents who instill their children with values and beliefs about what it means to be black in America and who speak to their children about the possible discrimination they may face as a result of being black, can actually help their children succeed in school.

Repeatedly, African American youth report feeling discriminated against in school by both teachers and peers. This discrimination may involve low academic expectations, bad grades, and exclusion from enrollment in advanced courses in school. Peer discrimination has an especially negative effect on African American youth. African American males who suffer from peer discrimination often develop bravado attitudes, feeling the need to prove their toughness, while females often form a negative self-image and suffer from low self-esteem. Whatever shape it may take, peer discrimination negatively impacts African American students’ educational success. However, many studies, backed most recently by the Wang and Huguley study, have shown that parents who instill ethnic pride in their children and prepare them ahead of time for possible racial prejudice can offset the negative effects of discrimination and help their children’s academic success.

The study results showed that students who reported having experienced negative treatment by teachers tended to have lower academic outcomes overall. This included having a lower GPA, fewer educational aspirations and goals for the future, a lower feeling of being part of the school community (school identification), and being less engaged in school. Students who experienced negative peer treatment also tended to have lower school identification. The researchers felt that the risk of negative academic outcomes for African American students who had experienced some type of racial discrimination was especially high in school settings where African Americans are the minority. They also suggested that racial socialization parenting practices have the most positive impact on older adolescents, rather than younger children. The researchers admitted that racial socialization parenting practices are by no means a cure-all for all of the problems associated with racial discrimination and negative educational outcomes of African American youth. More research is necessary in order to completely understand the dynamics of discriminatory practices and educational success, but racial socialization of African American youth by their parents is certainly a positive step in the right direction.

Reference:
Super School Districts

**Hampton Township School District** is a school district in Allegheny County that serves 2,957 students and employs 207 teachers. The District strives to hold all of its students to a high academic threshold and help students become problem-solvers and communicators who will have a positive influence on the world. The District fulfills its mission of academic excellence for all by offering its students the opportunity to enroll in 26 Honors Courses and 18 AP Courses at the High School level. The District has been recognized locally and nationally for its superb educational performance, including being ranked number two regionally out of 103 schools and number four statewide out of 493 schools by the Pittsburgh Business Times; being number four out of 491 school districts in Pennsylvania as offering the best value for housing dollar by NerdWallet; and ranked at 607 out of over 2,000 high schools nationwide by Newsweek and The Daily Beast. By all accounts and purposes, it seems that Hampton students are happy and Hampton teachers are proud of their accomplishments. With its emphasis on technology, acceptance of student diversity, and consistent high scores on PSSAs, SATs, and AP exams, it is no wonder that Hampton Township School District truly is one of the best.

**Woodland Hills School District** is a school district in Allegheny County that employs 351 professional staff and holds safety/security, challenging curriculum, and students’ dreams as its core values. With an exciting recent reconsolidation called “Plan for Excellence”, the District is making an educational shift necessary to meet the needs of its over 3,800 students, 80% of whom receive free and reduced lunch and the majority of whom come from minority backgrounds. By closing three Elementary School entities, the District is opening two K-3 primary schools with a focus on literacy and one, more hands-on, intermediate school for grades 4-6 with a focus on science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM). The hope is that this reconfiguration will better prepare students for the new 7-12 secondary school with its focus on career pathways. To further support students in the pivotal transition year of the 7th grade, the District has created a 7th Grade Academy as a separate part of the secondary school to expose students to interest level learning that will help determine their career pathway for post-secondary educational and vocational options. Additionally, the District will maintain its K-8 Woodland Hills Academy and its alternative education program, the Wolverine Promise Program. The district also offers a unique set of traditional and non-traditional fall, winter, spring, and club sports including football, baseball, tennis, track and field, girls’ volleyball, basketball, bowling, rifle, swimming, wrestling, ultimate frisbee, and rugby. Woodland Hills also offers a robust music and performing arts program that produces an award-winning marching band and celebrated musical productions. Students at the Woodland Hills High School also have the opportunity to take a range of 13 different AP courses. Recently, the Woodland Hills Senior High School was given a bronze medal for the Best High Schools in the country by U.S. News and World Report making this district one to keep an eye on.
Special Person Highlight: 

Alyssa Parr

Alyssa is a doctoral student in the Applied Developmental Psychology program. She received her undergraduate degree from Lake Forest College and came to the University of Pittsburgh after completing her M.Ed. in Educational Psychology at the University of Virginia. Although she always strongly valued education, Alyssa became passionate about the field of Educational Psychology after teaching in an urban school in Granada, Spain while studying abroad. Frequent conflicts relating to social class, struggles to teach in an environment with relatively little resources, and a lack of student motivation opened her eyes to the complexity of the school and classroom environment. It was this experience that inspired her to pursue a career in Educational Psychology and conduct research on student motivation along with cultural differences and issues of diversity. Currently, she is working on several different studies including a meta-analysis on classroom climate and quantitative studies on student engagement in STEM classrooms and in school more broadly. She is also working on a project to conceptualize the construct of teacher engagement as well as better understand the bidirectional relationship between teacher and student engagement in the classroom. In the future, Alyssa hopes to expand her research on teacher and student engagement to countries in Latin America to better understand cross-cultural differences in engagement. She then hopes that this knowledge can be used by school administrators and teachers to improve engagement and boost learn-
ALEXA CONNORS, a University of Pittsburgh Junior, recently presented a poster at the Psychology Department Directed Study Poster Session demonstrating her work with School of Education doctorate student Tara Hofkens on a research study related to two teachers’ experiences with reform-oriented math instruction. Alexa’s role in the study was to transcribe interviews with the teacher participants, develop a coding scheme about the nature of the teacher’s work, and seek to get an in-depth understanding of the teachers’ experiences using the new reform methods in their classrooms. She also had the opportunity to interview one of the teacher participants from the study.

Alongside working at the Developmental and Motivation Research Lab, Alexa is a psychology major and holds a certificate in children’s literature. She is also an intern at the Highmark Caring place, where she helps grieving children and adults deal with the loss of their loved ones through partner activities with other grieving families. In the future, Alexa hopes to get a doctorate in clinical psychology in order to help children who have experienced trauma. Alexa is already on her way to gaining more experience in her field of interest as she will begin research at Children’s Hospital in May. There, she will be helping Dr. Ana Radovic in writing blog posts for depressed teens as part of the new development of a website to engage depressed teens and their parents and help them choose treatment that is right for them.
JOY SHON, a University of Pittsburgh Freshman, recently presented a poster at the Psychology Department Directed Study Poster Session demonstrating her work on a study that explored how teachers deal emotionally with ambitious mathematics instruction in the classroom. Due to the problem of underachievement in mathematics and the fact that success in Algebra leads to promising futures, teachers are continuously being asked to implement ambitious learning goals for their students, like conceptual understanding and adaptive reasoning. However, teachers hesitate to use and apply ambitious instruction in their classrooms. Ambitious instruction is difficult, in part because it forces teachers to relinquish control, hence leaving room for students to confront and wrestle with challenging concepts independently. Up to this point, research has focused on the cognitive challenges of implementing ambitious instruction. In this study, Shon and the other researchers explored the affective, or emotional challenges, of two middle school math teachers who used ambitious instruction when working with students struggling with Algebra. They piloted the use of physiological data to get insight into teachers’ experiences of implementing ambitious instruction. Specifically, they used data collected from iCalm galvanic skin response (GSR) sensors to detect the teacher’s arousal throughout the class period and when responding to students who were stuck, which could help identify affective challenges. The specific goal of the research was to explore whether GSR data can detect variations in teacher activity, teacher affect, and working with students who are stuck. Joy reported that one of the major strengths of this study was the fact that it was the first to use physiological assessments to identify affective challenges in real-world settings. This process, Joy stated, could revolutionize how we study emotions by becoming the future of affective measurement in real time.

Currently, Joy is majoring in Psychology with a minor in Chemistry and getting a certificate in the Conceptual Foundations of Medicine. She hopes to continue doing research in the developmental psychology field in the future.
GINA PENG, a University of Pittsburgh Junior, recently presented a research poster at the Psychology Department Directed Study Poster Session. For this project, Gina worked with Alyssa Parr, a School of Education doctorate student, to conceptualize teacher engagement using transcripts from teacher and student interviews on student engagement in STEM classes. They coded the interview transcripts using a program called Dedoose and categorized them into various categories: Cognitive, Behavioral, Emotional, and Social engagement/disengagement. They also studied classroom and professional engagement as well as bidirectional engagement. After organizing all of the transcripts, they noticed that teachers’ perspective on student engagement tended to be cognitive in nature, involving reaching teaching goals and following through with appropriate classroom activities. Students, on the other hand, saw teacher engagement behaviorally, including how many activities teachers had planned and the teacher’s attitude. This project will hopefully lead to new interviews that focus on teacher engagement based on the patterns that were found.

Gina is currently majoring in Psychology and minoring in Japanese and Chemistry at the University of Pittsburgh, and she hopes to attend pharmacy school after graduating. Her great interest in developmental studies has motivated her to explore a wide range of research topics including her current project on teacher engagement. Her previous research experience includes investigating perinatal malformations in male infants at the Alfred I DuPont Hospital for Children. In her spare time, she enjoys playing tennis, doing both traditional and digital art, traveling, and studying foreign languages. She also has an identical twin sister named Vivian.
## Other Notes

| Dr. Wang is accepting doctoral students and undergraduate volunteers to help with on-going research projects at the lab! Visit the website or contact the lab for more information. |
| We’re on the web! | Contact us at: |
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**Developmental and Motivation Research Laboratory**

- **Food for thought**-

  “Education...is painful, continual and difficult work to be done in kindness, by watching, by warning,... by praise, but above all -- by example.”

  -- John Ruskin

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Image: "Operation Good Heart Gives a 6 Year-old Iraqi Girl a Second Chance at Life" by DVIDSHUB https://www.flickr.com/photos/dvids/3608553988/in/photolist-6uSMo5-kqgqdt-gfHvq1-7MrFA-7tzn9U-58Hioz-rjg9RM-5zM9LZ-85nvpj-8jPgwr-dA1sZq-7cPWaj-7vvNab-8oW95D-6B5sD2-4PaooF-6J89LC-jRXdE6-kgpQke-6JvpSQ-8bKk69-94b4k-53qsmV-9fQzeH-5PakbH-dJUGfk-pkEaD-9szRpv-7D9iHF-aYhtz4-7APxfn-bgAZJX-ajvGGC-6Mk7yA-4evkLo-7vB7oB-r7zFNF-7MRbjZ-r9emrD-7Z4k36-4qyDHx-A8fJt-VUf3-9fr1yu-qqXDxG-g5wR8-5VpTEA-qTKnK9-GcuQy

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[Source: http://www.pitt.edu/~wangresearch]