To Help or Not to Help: When does Parental Assistance with Homework Matter?

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BACKGROUND

- Homework positively predicts academic achievement, with percentile gains for middle school students around 12%
- Parental assistance with homework has received federal attention as a viable strategy to improve academic outcomes for youth
- However, findings linking homework help to academic outcomes for adolescent samples are mixed
- An integrative model of parenting (Darling & Steinberg, 1993) suggests that the effects of parenting practices depend in part on the context of the parent-child relationship

Objective of the current study:
1) Is the effect of parental homework help on adolescents’ academic motivation and school engagement enhanced by warm parent-adolescent relationships?
2) Do these links differ for fathers and mothers?

METHODS

Participants & Procedures
- 279 youth (53% African American) grades 6-8 (55% girls) completed in-school surveys

Measures
- Mother/Father homework help & warmth
- Academic Outcomes:
  - Intrinsic Motivation = academic motivation
  - School Self-Esteem = cognitive engagement
  - School Trouble = behavioral engagement
  - School Bonding = affective engagement

Analysis
- 3-Step Multiple Regression Analyses:
  - Controls (race & grade), main effects, & interaction

RESULTS

Fathers’ Models:
- At high levels of warmth, a one unit increase in homework help predicted:
  - A .34 increase in intrinsic motivation (β = .37*** Fig. 1)
  - A 1.74 increase in school self-esteem (β = .25**)
  - A 1.62 decrease in school trouble (β = -.33**)
- Warmth had a positive main effect on school bonding (B = 1.54, β = .28**)

Mothers’ Models:
- Warmth had a main effect on all outcomes, such that a one unit increase in warmth was linked to:
  - A .38 increase in intrinsic motivation (β = .31***)
  - A 2.62 increase in school self-esteem (β = .29***)
  - A 1.66 decrease in school trouble (β = -.26**)
  - A 1.50 increase in school bonding (β = .20*)
- At high levels of warmth, a one unit increase in homework help predicted a 1.54 decrease in school trouble (β = -.25* Fig. 2)

CONCLUSIONS

- Overall results suggest that parental assistance with homework may be developmentally appropriate for adolescents if delivered within the context of warm, supportive parent-adolescent relationships
- Given academic motivation and school engagement decline across adolescence, results emphasize sustaining positive relationships with fathers and mothers to support the best academic outcomes for youth
- This study provided empirical validation for the integrative model of parenting, and advanced understanding of the conditions under which parental homework help facilitates academic outcomes among adolescents

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.