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ABSTRACT

This publication consists of two research updates. The first, "Learning to Work: How Parents Nurture the Transition from School to Work," highlights conclusions from the study, "Lessons from Life's First Teacher: The Role of the Family in Adolescent and Adult Readiness for School-to-Work Transition," which offers an analysis of how families contribute to work-related learning. Its intended audience is parents. It describes two views of family involvement, discusses family pressures, and lists behaviors of proactive families that make significant contributions to the welfare of their members and the strength of the national work force. It also lists strategies that proactive families use to support learning and examples of work values found among proactive families. Sources of assistance for parents to use to enhance the family's capacity to nurture work-related development are cited. Seven resources for further information are listed. The second update, "Family Matters...in School-to-Work Transition," is intended for educational leaders and policymakers. It discusses the importance of families in the school-to-work transition and assumptions that have limited the recognition of the family's role. Drawing on the same study as the first update, this report addresses three topics: proactive, inactive, and authoritarian families; family work values that improve school-to-work readiness; and ways families influence work readiness. Policy recommendations are made. (YLB)

National Center for Research in
Vocational Education

University of California, Berkeley

LEARNING TO WORK:
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and
FAMILY MATTERS . . . IN SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITION

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LEARNING TO WORK: HOW PARENTS NURTURE THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK and FAMILY MATTERS . . . IN SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITION

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Research Update

Learning To Work

How Parents Nurture the Transition from School to Work

National Center for Research in Vocational Education

An update for parents from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education sites at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the University of Minnesota–St. Paul.

Family Gifts and Dreams

All parents have dreams for their children. Openly communicated dreams have a powerful effect, but more subtle things that go on in every family may be an even stronger influence on children. As U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley said, "Families are life's first teachers, often of lessons that are never forgotten."

> The day-to-day patterns of family relationship may be the most significant gift a family can make. . . . [T]he family exerts a profound influence on a person's career.

Most people would readily agree that parental involvement in children's education, starting at birth, is an essential way to nourish children's achievements. Some ways for families to help their children's education include the following:

- limiting TV viewing to ensure time for homework
- supporting school events
- encouraging continued education.

These are the more obvious ways parents help their children. However, the day-to-day patterns of family relationship may be the most significant gift a family can make. These include the never forgotten lessons in decision-making, good or poor work habits, conflict resolution, and communication skills that children carry with them their whole life. And families give their children a context for interpreting the realities of work by discussing their feelings about what it is like to work.

Studies over the last 25 years have shown that the family exerts a profound influence on a person's career. The family strongly conditions education, which in turn conditions occupational life. Work/family relationships are still very often misunderstood or too narrowly conceived. A new study from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, *Lessons from Life's First Teacher: The Role of the Family in Adolescent and Adult Readiness for School-to-Work Transition* offers the richest, most up-to-date, and detailed analysis of how families contribute to work-related learning. This research briefly highlights conclusions from that study.

Two Views of Family Involvement

Until recently, limited model of parent-to-child influence has prevailed. This is the "social mold" model, in which parents try to shape their children in a particular image. They do this by modeling appropriate career behaviors, providing enriching experiences, and supporting the development of desirable work-related attitudes. (Many children may flounder,

however, as they try to make vocational choices they perceive will please their parents.)

In another approach, rather than steering their children in a predetermined direction, parents try to prepare their children to be autonomous and successful in shaping their own lives. Development is seen as a process of relating, with parents and children interacting to share and create mutual understanding. In this way, youth can get a sense of gateways or channels to an ever-widening range of experiences, as opposed to one narrow track.

. . . Teaching children to be self-reliant is better suited to the new world of work, in which individuals need to be well-prepared for transition, adaptation, and change.

This way of parenting is demanding, and takes time to learn. But teaching children to be self-reliant is better suited to the new world of work, in which individuals need to be well-prepared for transition, adaptation, and change.

Family Pressures

Many parents face increased pressure in their own work life. They may have to work longer hours; they may be coping with work environments that are not supportive of family needs; or they may have to adapt to loss of worker benefits or to a decrease in job security.

Parents' lives may be more complex and demanding than ever before. At the same time, a great deal of social and personal pressure is placed on parents to do well for their children. Parents are expected to prepare their children for the lifelong process of acquiring skills, knowledge, and values in order to be successful in their adult life, to hold jobs and achieve self-sufficiency. This is a tall order. Public finger-pointing which suggests that parental failure is the cause of poor achievement among youth only makes parents' already difficult balancing act harder.

Ways Families Aid Work Readiness

Families can make significant contributions towards the welfare of their members and the strength of the national workforce. How?

- Sociability: having a group of friends, and enjoying being with others
- Expressiveness: sharing personal problems and giving voice to thoughts and ideas
- Cohesion: feeling together as a group, getting along well, and helping and supporting each other
- Democratic Decision Making: checking with other family members before making decisions and making rules together.
- Active Recreational Orientation: having hobbies, going to movies, participating in sporting events, and so on
- Locus of Control: feeling that decisions are their own, not forced on them, and encouraging individuals to develop in their own ways
- Conflict Management: having few fights, and responding to differences without losing tempers or hitting
- Engagement: keeping track of other family members
- Family Idealization: feeling that the family is important and harmonious
- Intellectual-Cultural Orientation: valuing music, art, and literature

Families with these behaviors strongly encourage work readiness. These families can be called *proactive.*

Families that are more inactive do not have an equally positive effect on school-to-work transition and actually work against it. These families are unable to function well either because they use a *laissez-faire* approach to family matters, because they cannot set guidelines, or because they do not pursue interests that involve places and persons outside of the family. Such traits make it more difficult for adolescents to develop self-knowledge or to differentiate their own goals from their parents' goals.

Dominating families are a third broad category. In these families, parents make all the important decisions, and there is

Families which promote education and positive attitudes towards schoolwork help youth develop learning strategies that will later improve their work readiness.

strict punishment for breaking the rules. Students from such families tend to indicate some post-high school plans, perhaps as a result of family pressure. However, these families do not specifically promote work readiness.

Families Supporting Education

Families which interact at school and provide support increase work readiness. The study showed that young people who appeared more ready for the transition from school to work came from families which had

- asked regularly about or helped with homework.
- attended school events and asked school personnel about their child's progress.
- helped develop potential job skills (such as photography) by encouraging hobbies.

The adults with the greatest readiness for transition to employment also reported that their families had

- provided them with financial and/or emotional support.
- made informal contacts for them regarding exploration for occupational choices.
- showed understanding by recognizing the need for study time and space.

Families which promote education and positive attitudes towards schoolwork help youth develop learning strategies that will improve their work readiness.

These learning strategies include finding classes that are challenging and where new things are learned; thinking of the class material as a starting point, and developing ideas beyond the assignment; and continuing to work even when the class is uninteresting.

Other strategies proactive families use to support learning are providing opportunities for family members to show off scholarly abilities at home; finding ways to instill confidence and expectations that family members will do well on difficult material, assignments, and tests; and making family members feel good about themselves.

Families Promoting Good Work Values

Family is an important source for values about work and working. Families which promote strong work values develop work readiness in their children. The following are examples of work values found among study participants.

- Choose work where there's opportunity for advancement.
- Match personal interests and skills to the job requirements.
- Find work that gives the chance to do something personally fulfilling.
- Be your own person; do not be overly dependent.
- Accept differences among people.

(continued on page 4)

Resources for Further Information

For further reading on how parents can help nurture work readiness, see the following works:

Berger, E. H. (1995). *Parents as partners in education.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Clarke, J. I. (1993). *Help! For parents of school-age children and teenagers.* San Francisco: Harper.

Elkind, D. (1993). *Parenting your teenager.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Grissmer, D. W., Kirby, S. N., Berends, M., & Williamson, S. (1994). *Student achievement and the changing American family.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Patterson, G., & Forgatch, M. (1987). *Parents and adolescents living together. Part 1: The basics.* Eugene, OR: Castalia Publishing Company.

Rich, D. (1988). *MegaSkills: In school and in life—The best gifts you can give your child.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Way, W. L., & Rossman, M. M. (in press). *Lessons from life's first teacher: The role of the family in adolescent and adult readiness for school-to-work transition* (MDS-725). Berkeley: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, University of California at Berkeley.

- Be helpful to others.
- Be responsible for your own actions.

Voices from Families

These "voices" illustrate the various roles parents and other family members play in nurturing transition readiness. Most are positive, but some have negative aspects too. These quotations come from interviews conducted with 31 adolescents as part of the study, about six months after their graduation from high school. These perceptions reflect the three aspects of family experience previously mentioned:

1. Parent-to-child guidance and support
2. Interactions between parents and children
3. Family as a place to interpret reality

Financial Support

I wasn't going to go to college 'cause I didn't have the money. So my Mom said that she'd pay for it, and she did. She said she'd pay for it as long as she can.

Conveyed Expectations

My parents both have jobs that they really like, they're with companies that they like, and they're doing things they're good at. They always kind of expected us to earn our way along. You know, we haven't been given a free ride.

Communicated "Sound Bites"

Do the best you can and always be there. Do what you're supposed to do. Keep your mouth quiet.

Provided Support and Interest

They've always pretty much stuck behind me or any of us, if it's what makes us happy. Even if they know it's wrong. They'll advise us it's wrong, but then they'll say, I support you.

Pushed or Controlled

They wanted me to go to college because no one in my family has ever been to college and they wanted me to be the first, and they pushed me to go to school and you know, do good. They really pushed.

Modeled Work Behaviors

Oh, yeah, they were real work-oriented and my mom's always worked full-time. My stepdad works a couple of jobs. I mean, work's always been a big thing. There's nobody lazy in my household. I learned to work hard.

Anxiety About the Future

There was a lot of fuss about my decision. My dad's not for it. He thinks it's too dangerous.

Illustrated Realities of Work

I think about my sister. After she graduated from high school, she just got married. I see how hard it is for them financially, just her and her husband, just to have one person working. I think that made me kinda want not to depend on one person financially.

Assistance for Families

As these "voices" from adolescents show, families have a powerful influence on work readiness. Although work and family have historically been viewed as separate, this is clearly not the case. Work readiness is largely dependent upon the work of the family. Parents can and should be a powerful force in enhancing work-related learning.

We encourage all parents to reflect on the ways their family operates, and to consider possibilities for helping their children prepare for the world of work.

Contacts

There are several sources of assistance for parents to use to enhance the family's capacity to nurture work-related development. These include the following:

- Parent education classes to develop parenting skills
- Support for workforce preparation offered by local and state service agencies (e.g., social service, job service, and vocational rehabilitation centers are available regionally in most areas. Many of these agencies offer coordinated family support services which combine job training, health care, financial assistance, and child care.)
- Family-focused research and advocacy organizations

The summary information contained herein has been extracted from manuscripts developed by the project directors, Wendy L. Way, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Marilyn Martin Rossman, University of Minnesota–St. Paul. For further reading on how parents can help nurture work readiness, see page 3.

Research Update

Family Matters . . .

in School-to-Work Transition

NCRVE

National Center for
Research in
Vocational Education

An update for Educational Leaders and Policymakers from the NCRVE sites at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Minnesota-St. Paul.

The Importance of Families

As never before, the nation is focused on improving the school-to-work transition for youth and adults. Families play a crucial role in the workplace readiness of their members. Education leaders and policymakers need to understand how families contribute to readiness for work, and they need to explore ways to enhance and improve family participation.

> "It will do the country little good . . . to restructure schools unless we . . . include families as integral components of restructured schools."
>
> Marshall and Tucker
> *Thinking for a Living*

Leaders such as U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley have recognized the importance of family, characterizing it as "life's first teacher," and emphasizing its place in nurturing educational success. As Marshall and Tucker wrote in *Thinking for a Living*, "it will do the country little good . . . to restructure schools unless we make families better learning systems and include families as integral components of restructured schools." Since the family is in a position to exert influence both before and after job prep interventions by schools, it makes sense to improve our understanding of its role.

Yet the family is usually overlooked or downplayed as a contributor to school-to-work programs. The 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act targets families, for example, for just two roles: contributors to career exploration and choice, and partners in designing and administering educational programs. Despite establishing a national education goal for parental involvement in schools, *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act of 1994* makes no specific connection between education for work and parental involvement in education.

Changing Families

Why is the family's essential role in enhancing education for work not better understood? One reason is that Americans are used to isolating family life from work life. Many of today's adults grew up in the 1950s when the typical family was comprised of a male breadwinner, children, and a stay-at-home wife and mother.

This configuration now represents only about 7% of all U.S. families. Today, two-thirds of all women work outside the home, including about two-thirds of all mothers with children and almost half of all mothers with children under a year old. Clearly, workforce education policy and practice cannot continue to separate family and work according to a model of the family based in the past.

Gender Roles

Society's gender roles have a strong effect. Male experience is often taken to be the standard, and therefore policy is often designed primarily from the male viewpoint. In male experience, it is easier to separate work from family. For instance, it is still more socially acceptable for men to put occupational work ahead of family work (e.g., staying late at the office or plant; traveling on business) and for women to put family work ahead of occupational work (e.g. staying home with a sick child). This male experience standard is frequently applied in developing educational policy related to work. In addition, several unexamined assumptions limit the recognition of the family's role. These include the following:

- the assumption that the family contributes to preparation for work mainly before adulthood
- the assumption that the only aspects of family functioning that bear on school-to-work transition are planned parental involvement in academic work or specific career development activities
- the assumption that there is little meaningful interaction between occupational work roles and other life roles such as family

Recent research has revealed that these assumptions are by no means valid across the board. *Lessons from Life's First Teacher: The Role of the Family in Adolescent and Adult Readiness for School-to-Work Transition*, a soon to be published study from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, paints a richer picture of the complex family roles in influencing school-to-work transition readiness.

The Study

Readiness for school-to-work transition has been analyzed as consisting of career maturity (vocational identity and career decision) and work effectiveness skills (past work performance, ability to compete for employment, and future capacity for advancement in a chosen occupation). NCRVE's study analyzed how relationships among individual and family background characteristics, family functioning styles, and individual learning strategies affect these work readiness indicators.

NCRVE's study analyzed how relationships among individual and family background characteristics, family functioning styles, and individual learning strategies affect work readiness indicators.

Policy aimed at enhancing parental involvement in schooling usually targets parent-to-child interactions about children's career exploration and activities like participation in schoolwork. These authors discovered that, in reality, the day-to-day background functioning style of the family has as direct an impact on the work readiness of students as more obvious activities.

Proactive Families

Families which maximize work readiness operate in proactive ways. These families

- are well-organized, cohesive, and expressive.
- speak their mind and manage conflict positively.
- seek out ways to grow and have fun.
- make decisions with reasoned discussion and democratic negotiation.

Behaviors like these encourage members to explore their world more broadly by developing a sense of personal security, developing confidence in expressing oneself and making one's own decisions, and developing organizational skills and ways to manage conflict. All these qualities are essential for work readiness.

Proactive families also help children develop learning skills which are useful in their school careers. In order to learn well, individuals need personal characteristics such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; self-efficacy; and critical thinking. And work readiness itself depends on these learning capacities.

Proactive families–families who are cohesive, expressive . . ., and have a democratic decision-making style–are positively associated with school-to-work readiness.

Inactive Families

Families which are more inactive have a poor effect on school-to-work transition. These families seem unable to function well either because they cannot set guidelines, or because they do not pursue interests that involve places and persons outside the family, or because they use a *laissez-faire* rather than proactive approach to family matters. Such habitual ways of functioning make it more difficult for adolescents to develop self-knowledge and to differentiate their own goals from their parents' goals.

Authoritarian Families

Authoritarian families seem to encourage students to indicate plans to continue with education beyond high school, perhaps as a response to family pressure. However, these families make no contribution to school-to-work transition readiness, defined here as career maturity and work effectiveness skills.

Strong Work Values

The study also found that strong work values in a parent's family of origin improve school-to-work readiness in both youth and adults. These values may include the following:

- Be your own person; don't be overly dependent.
- Accept differences among people.
- Be helpful to others.
- Be responsible for your own actions.
- Choose work where there's opportunity for advancement.
- Match personal interests and skills to the job requirements.
- Find work that gives the chance to do something personally fulfilling.

Adolescents' Voices

Some of the ways families influence work readiness are clear-cut. Parents can

- help children financially by paying for schooling.
- convey expectations. One teenage student describes his parents as "always pushin' me to be better. They always said you know, you need to go to college and get a career you know, to be something."
- communicate words to live by.
- provide career information and networking contacts.

As discussed, the day-to-day functioning style of the family is also a powerful influence. Qualities such as support, interest, and openness can give kids a tremendous boost. One adolescent reported, "My parents are behind me no matter what I do. It's basically whatever I've decided. When I need to talk to them, they're always there. If I need their help, like with a decision, I'll ask them, like, what they think, and then from there, like, I can decide what I should do."

Other behaviors can be experienced as pushing or controlling. Another adolescent complained, "It got to that point

For more information

For further reading on how parents can help nurture work readiness, see the following works:

Way, W. L. (1991). Frameworks for examining work-family relationships. In G. Felstehausen & J. B. Schultz (Eds.), *Work and family: Educational implications* (pp. 1-23). Peoria, IL: Glencoe Division, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill.

Way, W. L. (1994). Family, work, and human development: An approach to developing curricula. In F. M. Smith & C. O. Hausafus (Eds.), *The Education of early adolescents* (pp 119-129). Peoria, IL: Glencoe Division, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill.

Way, W. L., & Rossman, M. M. (1994). The interrelation of work and family: A missing piece of the vocational education research agenda. *Journal of Vocational Education Research, 19*(2), 1-24.

Way, W. L., & Rossman, M. M. (in press). *Lessons from life's first teacher: The role of the family in adolescent and adult readiness for school-to-work transition* (MDS-725). Berkeley: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, University of California at Berkeley.

where they were pushin' me just a little too hard and a little too fast. Change is hard . . . for awhile there I was really, you know, reconsid ering, am I doing this for them or am I doing this for me."

In other experiences, the family serves as a context for interpreting realities associated with work. This occurs through

- workplace stories.
- anxiety about children's future.
- modeled work behaviors.

Another adolescent commented, "My mom was very determined to get into what she wanted to do, which was the airline. It was kinda neat to watch her, you know, struggle to get where she wanted. And she ended up getting what she wanted. And that kinda helped me. If you try hard enough for long enough, you'll get it."

Policy Recommendations

Today's educational reform initiatives are largely focused on improving work skills. Work skills which will upgrade socioeconomic status are not, however, a magic gateway to bright occupational futures. An individual's success is mediated by the family and how it functions. Therefore, initiatives designed to aid school-to-work transition must pay more heed to involving and strengthening the family.

Since the day-to-day functioning of families has a powerful effect on the school-to-work transition readiness of students, policy must also consider . . . ways to ensure that families help establish good work values.

In order to improve the parental role in work readiness, policy needs to work on linking home and school by nurturing parental involvement in education. But since the day-to-day functioning of families has a powerful effect on the school-to-work transition readiness of students, policy must also consider strategies to help parents become more proactive in their day-to-day functioning at home, as well as ways to ensure that families help establish good work values.

Today's unparalleled discussions regarding educational reform provide an ideal context for giving more attention to linkages between family and work readiness. The time seems appropriate to extend these discussions into the arena of workforce education policy and practice.

The summary information contained in this update has been extracted from other manuscripts developed by the project directors, Wendy L. Way, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Marilyn Martin Rossman, University of Minnesota–St. Paul. For further reading on how parents can help nurture work readiness, see page 3.

The National Center for Research in Vocational Education's mission is to strengthen education to prepare all individuals for lasting and rewarding employment and lifelong learning.

The NCRVE is the nation's largest center for research, development, dissemination, and outreach in work-related education. Since 1988, the organization has been headquartered at the University of California at Berkeley, with Berkeley assisted in its efforts by several universities and research organizations. NCRVE has played a key role in developing and disseminating a new concept of vocational education as it works toward fulfilling its mission of strengthening education.