PISA IN FOCUS 10

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What can parents do to help their children succeed in school?

- Fifteen-year-old students whose parents often read books with them during their first year of primary school show markedly higher scores in PISA 2009 than students whose parents read with them infrequently or not at all.
- The performance advantage among students whose parents read to them in their early school years is evident regardless of the family's socio-economic background.
- Parents' engagement with their 15-year-olds is strongly associated with better performance in PISA.

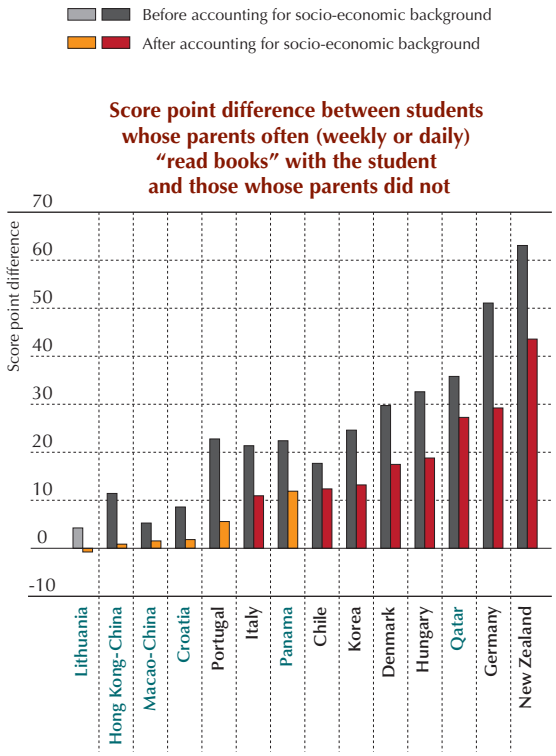
Most parents know, instinctively, that spending more time with their children and being actively involved in their education will give their children a good head-start in life. But as many parents have to juggle competing demands at work and at home, there never seems to be enough time. Often, too, parents are reluctant to offer to help their children with school work because they feel they lack some of the skills that would make a difference to their children's success in school.

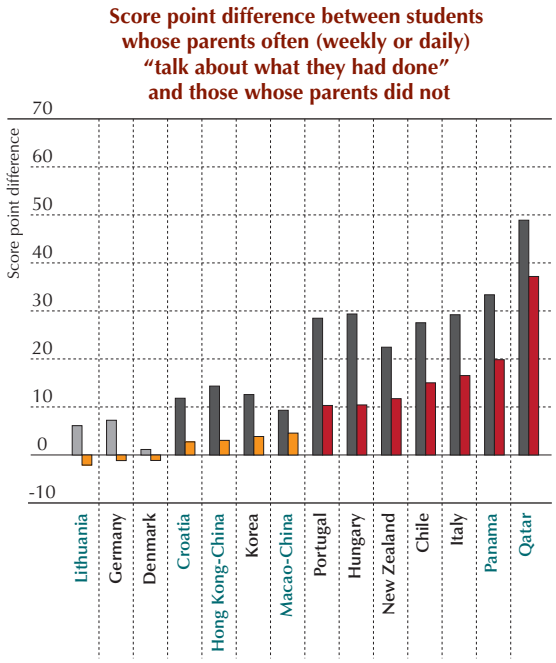
The good news coming from analyses of PISA data is that it does not require a PhD or unlimited hours for parents to make a difference. In fact, many parent-child activities that are associated with better reading performance among students involve relatively little time and no specialised knowledge. What these activities do demand, though, is genuine interest and active engagement.

Early involvement pays dividends later…

The PISA 2009 assessment did not only gather data from students and school principals but also addressed questions to the students' parents. Some of these questions focused on the kinds of activities parents did with their children when the children were in their first year of primary school; other questions concentrated on activities parents were engaged in with their children at the time of the PISA test, that is, when their children were 15 years old.

Parental support at the beginning of primary school





Note: Values that are statistically significant are marked in a darker tone.

Countries are ranked in ascending order of score point differences after accounting for socio-economic background.

Source: OECD, *PISA 2009 Database*, Tables II.5.3 and II.5.4.

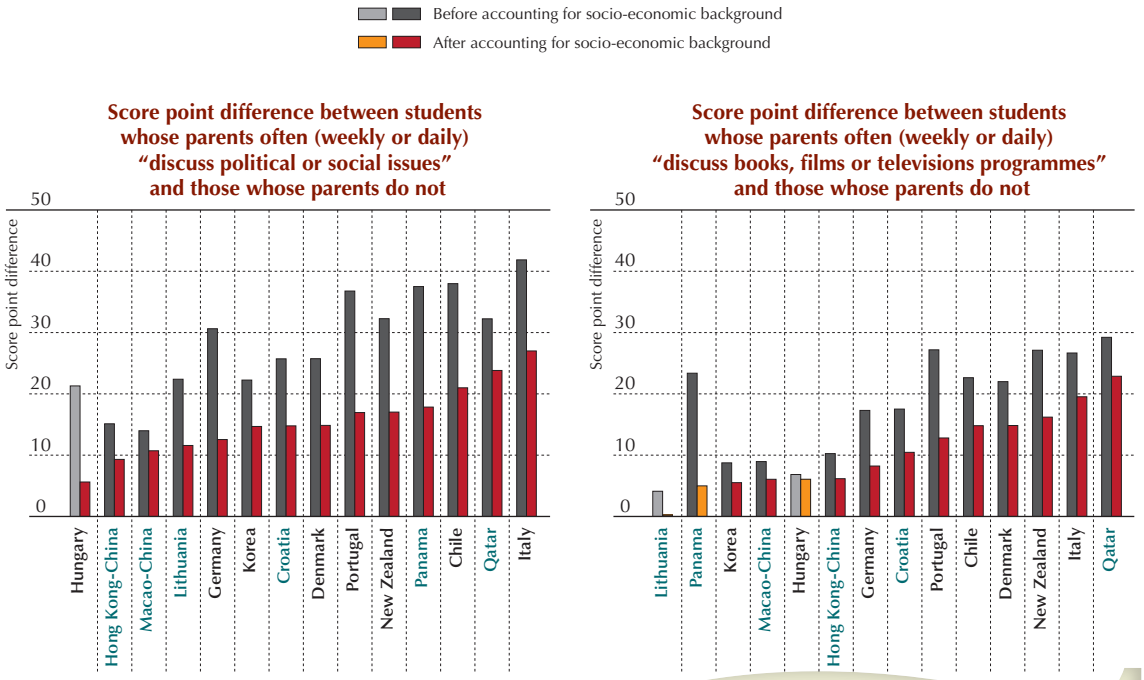
The parents' responses show a close relationship between their own involvement with their child and their child's engagement in reading-related activities during the first year of primary school and their reading performance at age 15. Students whose parents reported that they had read a book with their child "every day or almost every day" or "once or twice a week" during the first year of primary school have markedly higher scores in PISA 2009 than students whose parents reported that they had read a book with their child "never or almost never" or only "once or twice a month". On average across the 14 countries for which data are available, the difference is 25 score points, the equivalent of well over half a school year; but this gap ranges from 4 points in the partner country Lithuania to 63 score points in New Zealand.

...regardless of a family's socio-economic background.

Differences in performance that are associated with parental involvement partly mirror differences in the socio-economic backgrounds of households, since, on average, students in socio-economically advantaged households enjoy an environment that is more conducive to learning in many ways, including having more involved parents. However, even when comparing students of similar socio-economic backgrounds, those students whose parents regularly read books to them when they were in the first year of primary school score 14 points higher, on average, than students whose parents did not.

Interestingly, different types of parent-child activities have different relationships with reading performance. For example, on average, the score point difference in reading that is associated with parental involvement is largest when parents read a book with their child, when they talk about things they have done during the day, and when they tell stories to their children. The score point difference is smallest when parental involvement takes the form of parents playing with alphabet toys with their children.

Parental support when the student is 15



Note: Values that are statistically significant are marked in a darker tone.
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Source: OECD, *PISA 2009 Database*, Tables II.5.3 and II.5.4.

Students are never too old to benefit from their parents' interest in them.

Results from PISA also show a strong association between some parent-child activities, when the children are 15, and students' reading performance in PISA. For example, students whose parents discuss political or social issues with them either weekly or daily score 28 points higher, on average, than those whose parents discuss these issues less often or not at all. The performance advantage is largest in Italy – 42 score points – and smallest in the partner economy Macao-China – 14 score points. When socio-economic background is taken into account, the score point advantage drops, but remains important – 16 score points – and is observed in all participating countries and economies, except Hungary. PISA findings also show that other parent-child activities, such as "discussing books, films or television programmes", "discussing how well children are doing at school", "eating main meals together around the table" and "spending time just talking with one's children" are also associated with better student reading performance in school.

The bottom line: All parents can help their children achieve their full potential by spending some time talking and reading with their children – even, perhaps especially, when their children are very young. Teachers, schools and education systems should explore how they can help busy parents play a more active role in their children's education, both in and out of school.

For more information

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See *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes* (Volume II)

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Coming next month

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