



5

## Show Your Children that You Value Reading, too

Children – even older children, although they may not want to admit it – look to their parents as role models. This chapter explores how children whose parents have more positive attitudes towards reading are better at reading, themselves, and enjoy reading more.



*"I'm sorry, sir, but Dostoyevsky is not considered summer reading. I'll have to ask you to come with me."*

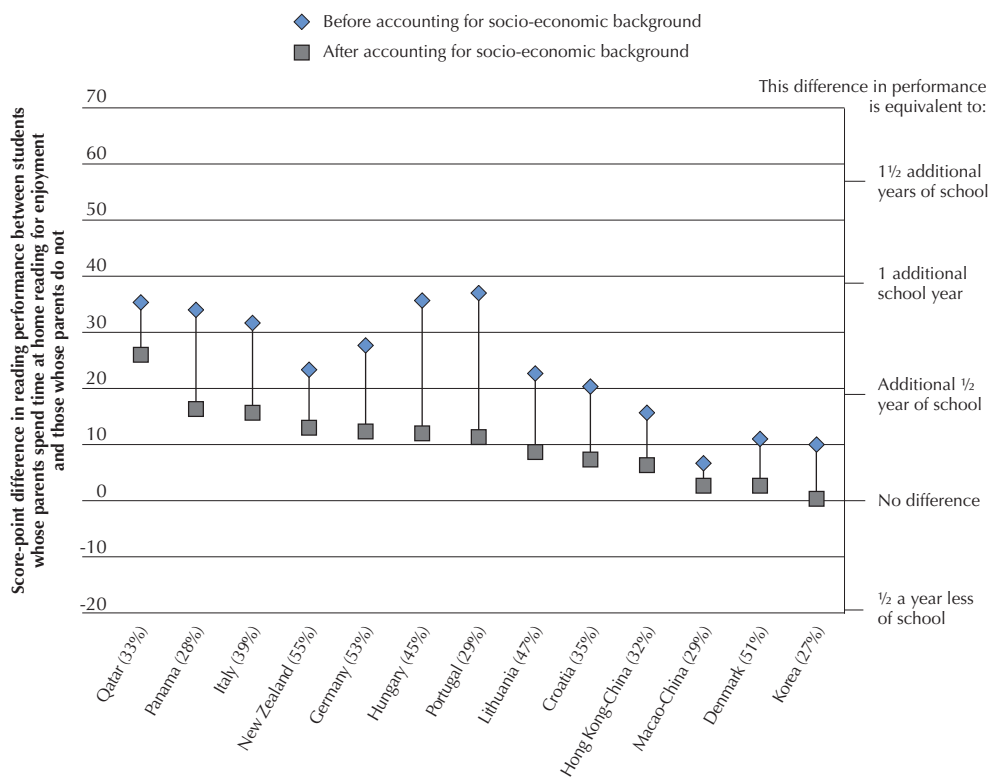


As children age, the influence of parents diminishes while that of peers and others outside the family grows. But that doesn't mean that adolescents don't still need – and want, even if they may deny it – their parents' genuine interest in their lives. While adolescents may observe their parents more critically than they did when they were younger, they still absorb their parents' attitudes and note their parents' actions. So in addition to being actively involved in their child's academic lives, by helping to guide their decisions about their education, monitoring their school work and engaging with them intellectually, parents can also be implicitly involved by acting as role models.

Imitation is not only the greatest form of flattery; it is also one of the tools children use to make their way into the adult world. Their parents' habits and attitudes towards intellectually engaging activities, and towards books and academic achievement, shape their own attitudes towards reading, school and learning, and may ultimately be related to school performance, as well.

■ Figure 5.1 ■

### Set a good example for your children by reading yourself



Note: The percentage of parents who spend time reading for enjoyment is shown in parentheses after the country/economy name. Countries/Economies are ranked in descending order of the difference in reading performance after accounting for socio-economic background.

Source: Table A5.1.

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To find out if there is any association between parents' attitudes towards reading and their children's reading proficiency, PISA asked parents whether they consider reading a hobby or a waste of time, whether they spend time reading at home for pleasure, and whether they enjoy going to a library or bookstore.

Children whose parents are more inclined to read and hold positive attitudes towards reading are better at reading than children whose parents do not share those positive attitudes. In all countries and economies assessed, the children whose parents do not think reading is a waste of time or who spend more time reading at home for enjoyment have significantly higher scores in reading. For example, in Hungary, Italy, New Zealand, Panama, Portugal and Qatar, children whose parents think that reading is a waste of time score more than 50 points – or more than one full school year – lower in reading than children whose parents do not think reading is a waste of time. Similarly, in these countries, children whose parents spend time reading for enjoyment at home score more than 30 points – the equivalent of nearly a full school year – higher in reading than children whose parents do not.

Socio-economically advantaged parents are more likely than other parents to hold these kinds of positive attitudes towards books and reading. Yet even when families of similar socio-economic backgrounds are considered, there is still a strong link between parents' habits and attitudes towards reading and student reading performance. That means that the relationship is not dependent on the socio-economic background of the family.

Not surprisingly, in all countries and economies surveyed, children whose parents consider reading a hobby, enjoy going to the library or bookstore, and spend time reading for enjoyment at home are more likely to enjoy reading themselves. This is true even when comparing children from similar socio-economic backgrounds, which indicates that children are more likely to enjoy reading when their home environment is conducive to reading. This relationship is found to be particularly strong in Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Qatar.

### Box 5.1 United States: Cool Culture

Cool Culture, a non-profit organisation in New York City, offers low-income families with young children **free access to cultural institutions**. The initiative, launched in 1999, is rooted in the belief that exposure to cultural activities helps to develop language proficiency in children as they express their observations and opinions about what they experience in museums, gardens and zoos.

Families with a child enrolled in one of the member early-childhood programmes receive a personalised "Cool Culture Family Pass" that grants them free entry, for up to five family members, to 91 cultural institutions in the city. Cool Culture also develops "Culture Hunt Cards", available in **several languages**, that prompt families to find particular objects in the cultural institutions they visit – and to discuss both the objects and the institutions before, during and after the visits.

Cool Culture is two-thirds funded by private donations and one-third funded by public institutions. All publicly funded early childhood education centres in New York City that serve low-income families are invited to enrol in the programme. The organisation now works with over 400 Head Start, child care and universal pre-kindergarten programmes in the city. In 2010-11, some 180 000 adults and children visited cultural institutions using a Cool Culture Family Pass.

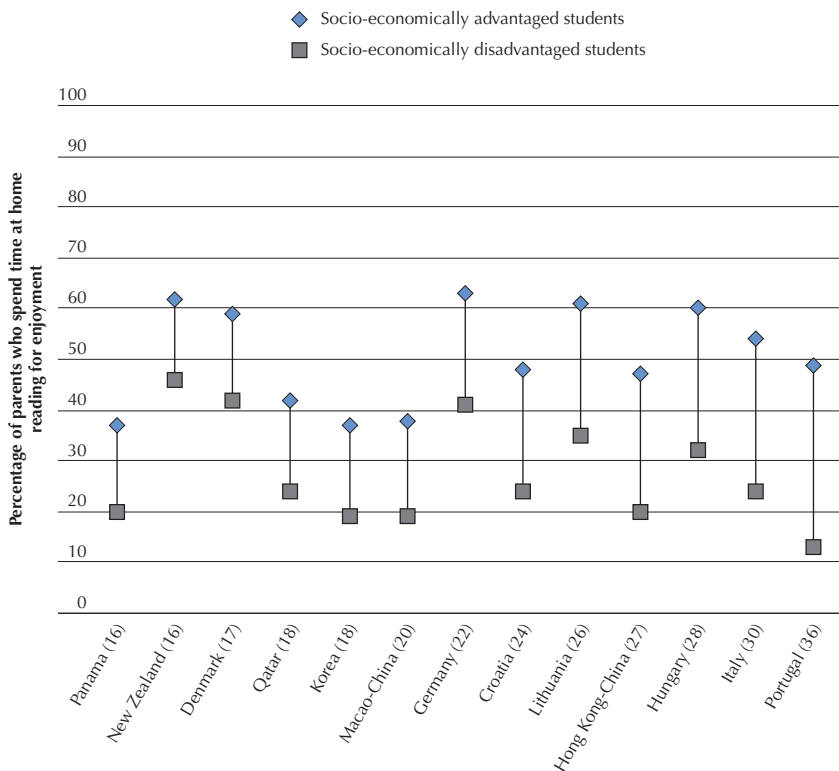
[www.coolculture.org](http://www.coolculture.org)



PISA also found an association between parents' positive attitudes towards reading and their child's awareness of which strategies are the most effective for summarising information they have read. But much of this relationship is linked to students' socio-economic background. For example, in 11 countries and economies, when students from different socio-economic backgrounds are compared, children whose parents read at home for enjoyment are more aware of effective summarising strategies. But when students from similar socio-economic backgrounds are compared, this relationship only holds in Hungary, Italy, Panama and Qatar. This indicates that parents' reading habits are related to socio-economic status (advantaged parents are more likely to read at home for enjoyment) and that, in most countries and economies, any relationship between parents' habits and students' awareness of effective summarising strategies largely reflects the family's socio-economic background.

■ Figure 5.2 ■

### Disadvantaged students more often lack adult role models for reading



Note: The difference between the percentage of socio-economically advantaged parents who spend time at home reading for enjoyment and the percentage of disadvantaged parents who do appears in parentheses after the country/economy name.

Countries/Economies are ranked in ascending order of the difference between the percentage of socio-economically advantaged parents who spend time at home reading for enjoyment and the percentage of disadvantaged parents who do.

Source: Table A5.1.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932606663>



On average across the PISA countries and economies that measured parental involvement, only 4 out of 10 parents regularly read at home for enjoyment. In all countries and economies, those parents who read at home for enjoyment are more likely to be socio-economically advantaged, and this partly explains the differences in reading performance between students from an advantaged background and those from a disadvantaged background.

Mothers are marginally more likely than fathers to have positive attitudes towards reading. PISA finds that mothers are more likely to consider reading a favourite hobby, to feel happy when receiving a book as a present, and are more likely to enjoy going to a library or a bookstore. In some countries and economies these differences are particularly marked: in Germany, around three-quarters of mothers, but only around half of fathers consider reading a favourite hobby or enjoy going to a bookstore or a library. Differences are also large in New Zealand. In most countries and economies, neither mothers nor fathers are avid readers: only in Denmark, Germany and New Zealand does the majority of mothers read for enjoyment, while in most countries and economies only about a third of mothers and fathers does so.

### WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Read. It's that simple. If parents – both mothers and fathers – don't like to read novels, say, but prefer to read newspapers and magazines, that's fine. What is important is showing children – of all ages – that reading is a daily, enjoyable, valuable activity, and that it is made even more pleasurable when people discuss what they have read with others.

Those parents who do not like to read, or feel they do not have enough time to read for pleasure, can still encourage their children to read by offering books as presents, taking their young children to the library, and talking with their children about what their children are reading, either for their own pleasure or at school.

#### Box 5.2 What can businesses and governments do?

Encouraging greater parental involvement in children's education will be more effective if society perceives that engagement as a worthwhile investment, and if some of the constraints on parents' time are loosened. Governments can play a direct role by designing and implementing policies that can help parents reconcile work and care responsibilities. They can play an indirect role by, for example, providing financial support, either through grants/subsidies or tax incentives to non-profit organisations or local businesses, to communities that foster parental involvement. Businesses can help, too, by implementing these policies.

Most children in OECD countries grow up in families where both parents are in paid work. To help parents achieve a better work-family balance, policies in many OECD countries now provide for family-friendly working arrangements.<sup>1</sup> These include:

- **Flexibility to adjust working practices**, including reducing working hours (part-time work); flexitime arrangements (flexibility to define starting and finishing hours, and "time-saving accounts", in which the length of the working day or week can be adjusted); and teleworking or working from home.<sup>2</sup>

(continues...)

**Box 5.2 What can businesses and governments do?** (continued)

- **Leave from work**, including holidays, parental leave support and sick-day entitlements to help parents deal with unpredictable family emergencies.
- **Support for child and out-of-school care services.** Increasingly, OECD countries provide formal out-of-school-hours (OSH) care services at some point during the day, as well as during school holidays. These are frequently, but not always, based in school facilities or youth centres, and involve recreational activities and/or help with homework. OSH care activities have received considerable attention because, besides offering a care solution for working parents, they have been associated with positive school performance, including regular school attendance, higher academic achievement and lower dropout rates. In most countries, OSH-type schemes are still in the early stages of development and coverage is limited. In Germany, Italy, Korea, Poland and Spain, for example, fewer than 10% of primary school children participate in such schemes. But in Australia, Denmark, Hungary and Sweden, more than 50% of young children do. OSH services are most important for 6-9-year-olds; enrolment rates for teenagers drop off sharply as these students become more independent and prefer to spend their time with their peers outside of an organised activity.<sup>3</sup>

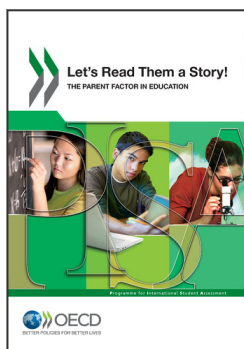
Not all parents work in places that offer family-friendly working arrangements; and even if they do, some parents, particularly fathers, do not always feel comfortable using them. They may feel that if they do, their careers and earnings potential may suffer. These kinds of arrangements should thus be offered as part of a general workplace culture that supports parents' need to better balance their family responsibilities with their work responsibilities.

Several OECD governments have implemented policies to encourage fathers to take leave to care for young children; many of these schemes include a non-transferable paid-leave entitlement for the exclusive use of fathers. So far, take-up has been low, however. Still, men who use more parental leave entitlements may be more likely to share childcare and housework responsibilities with their partners, and may be more inclined to become engaged in the kinds of parent-child activities described in this report.<sup>4</sup>



## Notes

1. OECD (2011), *Doing Better for Families*, OECD Publishing.
2. One type of flexibility measure that can be particularly useful for working parents is teleworking, i.e. work that can be carried out at a distance from the usual workplace. Its use, however, remains limited. Available information on teleworking suggests that a maximum of 15% of employees in OECD countries use this form of workplace flexibility on a regular basis (*OECD Family Database - Indicator LMF2.4*) [www.oecd.org/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database).
3. OECD (2011), *Doing Better for Families*, OECD Publishing.
4. Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (2007) show that fathers in the United States who take two or more weeks off work after childbirth are much more likely to participate in childcare activities nine months later. In addition, Haas and Hwang (2008) show that the amount of parental leave taken by Swedish fathers was positively associated with many aspects of childcare. In addition, the more leave fathers took, the more they reported higher satisfaction with their father-child relationship. Men are more likely to bond with their children if they spend time caring for them from an early age (Nepomnyaschy, L. and J. Waldfogel [2007], "Paternity Leave and Fathers' Involvement with their Young Children", *Community, Work and Family*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 427-453; Haas, L. and P.C. Hwang [2008], "The impact of taking parental leave on fathers' participation in childcare and relationships with children: Lessons from Sweden", *Community, Work and Family*, No. 11, pp. 85-104).



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