Parental Expectations for Their Children’s Academic Attainment

Half of parents with annual incomes of less than $25,000 expect their child will attain a four-year-college degree, compared with nearly seven out of eight parents with incomes over $75,000.

Importance

Expectations parents have for their children's school attainment influence their children's expectations and achievement, and early expectations tend to persist throughout the child's school years.[1] Research has shown that parental expectations for children's academic achievement predict educational outcomes more than do other measures of parental involvement, such as attending school events.[2],[3],[4],[5]

Parents’ expectations influence child outcomes through multiple pathways. Parental expectations are more likely to affect their children when parent-child relationships are characterized by closeness and warmth.[6] Parental expectations directly affect the amount of parent-child communication about school.[7] In addition, families with high educational aspirations for their children provide more out-of-school learning opportunities for them.[8],[9] Students who reported their parents expected them to attend college had better attendance and more positive attitudes toward school, according to one study.[10] Parental expectations also affect the child's own aspirations and expectations; for instance, studies suggest that parents' expectations for their children's academic attainment have a moderate to strong influence on students' own goals for postsecondary education. Further, both sets of expectations are moderated by characteristics of the parent, child, and community (see below).[11],[12]

Trends
Overall, prior research has indicated that the great majority of parents expect their children to graduate from high school and complete at least some postsecondary education.\[13\] In 2007, about two-thirds of parents with students in grades six through 12 expected their child would attain a bachelor's degree or higher (70 percent). About one in five (22 percent) expected their child would achieve some postsecondary education short of a bachelor's degree; and about one in ten (nine percent) expected their child would receive a high school diploma or less. Between 2003 and 2007, parents' expectations rose modestly. There was an increase in the proportion of parents expecting their child to earn a bachelor's degree or higher (from 65 to 70 percent), a decline in those expecting "some" postsecondary education (from 26 to 22 percent), and little change in the share of parents expecting children to earn a high school diploma or less (from 9.1 to 8.8 percent). (Figure 1)

**Differences by Gender**

Overall, parents have higher academic expectations for girls than they do for boys, and this gender difference becomes apparent as early as sixth grade.\[14\] In 2007, nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of parents of girls expected them to get a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with two-thirds (66 percent) of parents of boys. This gender gap did not grow between 2003 and 2007. (Figure 1)

**Differences by Race and Hispanic Origin**\[15\]
The proportion of parents with the highest expectations for attainment (bachelor's degree or more) is greatest among Asian/Pacific Islanders (89 percent in 2007), followed by whites (72 percent), Hispanics (67 percent), and blacks (62 percent). (Figure 2) Between 2003 and 2007, parental expectations for attainment at the bachelor’s degree level or above increased by 10 percentage points among Asian/Pacific Islanders, six percentage points among whites, and two percentage points among Hispanics, while it fell by one percentage point among blacks. (Appendix 1)

Differences by Household Income Level

Only about half of low-income parents (those with annual incomes of $25,000 or less) expect their children to attain a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with more than seven out of eight parents earning $75,000 or more. As would be expected, this means that low-income parents are more than eight times as likely as the wealthiest parents to expect their child to do no
more than finish high school (19.3 and 2.2 percent, respectively). (Figure 3) Parental expectations by parents' own level of education follow a similar pattern. (Appendix 1)

Differences by Immigrant Status

Compared with U.S.-born parents, immigrant parents have higher expectations for educational attainment. Among immigrant parents of native-born children, 81 percent expect their child to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. Among immigrant parents whose child in foreign-born, that proportion is 74 percent. And, among native-born parents with native-born children, it is 68 percent. (Appendix 1)

Differences by Student's Grade Level

Parents' educational expectations for their child are conditioned in part by the level of schooling the child has already attained. Parental expectations that a child will get a bachelor's degree or higher declines with age, while expectations that a child will only receive some post-secondary education rises. Seventy-three percent of parents of sixth-through eighth-graders have expectations of a bachelor's degree-or-higher for their child, 69 percent of parents of ninth- or tenth-graders, and 66 percent of parents of eleventh/twelfth-graders. However, the proportion of parents expecting their child to attain no more than a high school diploma peaks in ninth- through tenth-grade, then declines somewhat from (nine percent for students in grades six through eight, 10 percent in grades nine through ten, and to eight percent at eleventh/twelfth grade). (Appendix 1)

Differences by Student's Current Grades

Not surprisingly, parents' expectations for their child's future are related to their perception of his or her current performance in school. Eighty-nine percent of parents who said that their children are currently earning "mostly As" have expectations that they will earn a bachelor's degree or more, compared with 32 percent of parents who said their children earn "mostly Ds and Fs." Only three percent with parents whose children are in the "mostly As" group expect their child will get no more than a high school diploma, whereas 28 percent with children in the "mostly Ds and Fs" group have this expectation. (Appendix 1)

Differences by Number of Activities Parents and Child Share

Parents who are more involved in their children's lives, as measured by the number of
shared activities, are more likely to hold higher expectations for their child’s education. Visiting a library together, attending a concert or play, visiting an art gallery, museum, or historical site, or going together to a zoo or aquarium were listed as the kinds of activities parents and children might have shared in the past month. Among parents who counted three or four such activities, 79 percent expected their child to achieve a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 62 percent among parents who did not share any such activities with their child in the past month. More striking, between six and seven percent of parents who shared at least one activity with their child expected that they would not attain more than a high school diploma, compared with 12 percent of parents who shared no activities in the past month. (Appendix 1)

**State and Local Estimates**

None available.

**International Estimates**

None available.

**National Goals**

None.

**Related Indicators**

- High School Dropout Rates
- Reading Proficiency
- Mathematics Proficiency
- Science Proficiency
- Writing Proficiency
- Parental Involvement in Schools
- Parental Education

**Definition**

Parents were asked how far they expect their child to go in his or her education. The response categories were: 1) to receive less than a high school education, 2) to graduate from high school, 3) to attend a vocational or technical school after high school, 4) to attend two or more years of college, 5) to finish a four- or five-year college degree, and 6)
to earn a graduate degree or professional degree beyond a bachelors. The responses were combined into three categories: 1) high school or less, 2) some postsecondary education, and 3) college graduate or higher.

**Data Source**

Child Trends' original analysis of the 2003 and 2007 National Household Education Surveys.

**Raw Data Source**


http://nces.ed.gov/nhes/

**Appendix 1 - Percentage Distribution of Parental Expectations of Academic Attainment for Children in Grades 6 through 12, 2003 and 2007**

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<td>64.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>66.5</td>
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</table>
Asian or Pacific Islander | 4.4 | 16.0 | 79.6 | 4.8 | 5.8 | 89.4

**Current Grade Level**

Sixth through eighth grade | 8.8 | 23.0 | 68.2 | 8.5 | 19.0 | 72.5

Ninth or tenth grade | 11.0 | 26.9 | 62.2 | 10.3 | 20.8 | 68.9

Eleventh or twelfth grade | 7.5 | 28.2 | 64.3 | 7.8 | 26.0 | 66.2

**Household Income**

$25,000 or less | 17.2 | 31.9 | 50.9 | 19.3 | 30.8 | 49.9

$25,001 to $50,000 | 11.0 | 33.0 | 56.0 | 11.8 | 28.4 | 59.8

$50,001 to $75,000 | 5.2 | 25.1 | 69.8 | 6.2 | 23.9 | 70.7

More than $75,000 | 3.6 | 13.7 | 82.7 | 2.2 | 11.2 | 86.5

<table>
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<th>2007</th>
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<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>Some Postsecondary Education¹</td>
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</table>

**Parental Education²**

Less than a high school degree | 27.5 | 28.9 | 43.7 | 29.7 | 21.2 | 49.1

High school degree/equivalent | 16.5 | 39.6 | 43.9 | 17.1 | 34.2 | 48.7

Some college/technical vocational degree | 7.1 | 30.6 | 62.3 | 6.7 | 30.2 | 63.1

Bachelor's degree or more | 1.6 | 10.1 | 88.3 | 2.6 | 8.3 | 89.1

**Student's Average Grades Across All Subjects**

Mostly A's | 2.9 | 11.1 | 85.9 | 3.2 | 7.4 | 89.4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Mostly C’s</th>
<th>Mostly D/F’s</th>
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<tr>
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<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Child’s Immigrant Status**

| Native-born with native-born parents | 9.0 | 27.3 | 63.8 | 8.9 | 23.0 | 68.1 |
| Native-born with a foreign-born parent | 6.2 | 19.5 | 74.3 | 6.2 | 12.7 | 81.2 |
| Foreign-born | 10.9 | 13.6 | 75.5 | 9.6 | 16.0 | 74.4 |

**Urbanicity**

| Urban, inside urbanized area | 7.8 | 22.8 | 69.4 | 9.0 | 20.2 | 70.8 |
| Urban, outside urbanized area | 10.0 | 28.9 | 61.1 | 8.8 | 19.3 | 71.9 |
| Rural | 12.6 | 31.9 | 55.5 | 8.6 | 28.6 | 62.8 |

**Type of School**

| Public | 9.5 | 26.7 | 69.7 | 9.4 | 22.4 | 68.2 |
| Private (not church-related) | 2.3 | 12.0 | 85.7 | 2.8 | 9.0 | 88.2 |
| Private (church-related) | 9.1 | 14.5 | 76.4 | 10.1 | 17.2 | 72.7 |

**Parent-Student Educational/Cultural Activities**

| No activities | 12.8 | 30.2 | 57.0 | 12.4 | 25.9 | 61.7 |
| One activity | 8.8 | 27.2 | 64.0 | 6.9 | 19.7 | 73.5 |
| Two activities | 4.4 | 17.8 | 77.8 | 6.0 | 19.2 | 74.8 |
| Three or four | 1.0 | 15.4 | 83.4 | 6.0 | 14.0 | 72.0 |
Note: Respondent was one parent (usually the child's mother), or "the most knowledgeable adult.

1"Some postsecondary education" includes attending a vocational or technical school after high school, or attending two or more years of college but finishing with less than a four- or five-year college degree. 2Refers to most educated parent. 3NHES measured four forms of educational and cultural activities that students and parents may have shared within the past month: 1) visiting a library, 2) attending a concert or play, 3) visiting an art gallery, museum or historical site, and 4) visiting a zoo or aquarium. Source: Child Trends' original analyses of National Household Education Survey data.

Endnotes


[13] Ibid.


[15] Hispanics may be of any race. Whites and blacks in this report do not include Hispanics.

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