What influences fathers' involvement at school, and why does it matter?

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Contents

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1. What's the issue?

Parental engagement in a child's care and education has important benefits for children.

Understanding what enables or hinders fathers' involvement in a child's education is important.

Promoting 'school readiness' and closing attainment gaps are central to current policy debates[2] because early educational attainment shapes educational pathways, future prospects, and opportunities to progress into higher education and employment.

'PIECE' (Paternal Involvement and its Effects on Children's Education') - a major study in 2021-23 that analysed data from over 5,000 two-parent households across England[1] - found that fathers' and mothers' engagement operated in different ways, bringing different inputs to a child's cognitive and educational development. More specifically, it found that fathers' engagement in activities like reading, drawing, arts and crafts was associated with a child's educational attainment in the early stages of primary school whilst mothers' engagement was associated with a child's emotional and pro-social behaviour (Norman and Davies 2023). This suggests that supporting both parents to be engaged in care and education is critical for children's development.

Yet fathers' and mothers' contributions to a child's care and education remain unbalanced. Fathers are less likely to contribute to childcare compared to mothers (e.g., see Norman 2020), and they are even less likely to participate in activities associated with the child's school. For instance, findings from the PIECE study show that fathers are only half as likely as mothers to engage in activities such as classroom help, fundraising, or serving as a school governor (Norman, Smith and Davies 2023). Why is the case? In this report, we aim to explain the gender imbalance in contributions to children's education and identify ways to support and encourage greater father involvement with the child's school.

Why does supporting fathers to be more involved at school matter?

The PIECE study found that fathers' engagement in home learning activities is important for children's educational attainment but we know less about what enables or prevents their involvement in other activities to support the child's education – such as helping in the classroom, attending parent's evenings and joining the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Although the impact of parental involvement with schools (or early education providers) on children's educational outcomes is less clear than that of engagement in the home learning environment (e.g., as shown by Norman and Davies 2023), it is nevertheless important to address persistent gender disparities in caregiving and educational responsibilities.

Furthermore, participating in school activities may have some positive implications for both parents and children. It could provide an initial step that helps parents understand, value and give shape to their own unique contributions to their children's learning. If fathers are more connected to the school, they may be better guided by the school's resources and recommendations, which could support their engagement in their child's learning (Norman, Zhuang and Davies 2024).

Aim and research questions

This report explores fathers' and mothers' involvement in home learning and at school. We analyse a sample of data collected by Parentkind's (PK) 2023 National Parent Survey (NPS) – a representative survey of fathers and mothers who (in our sample) have dependent children (aged 16 and under) living in the UK.

The survey provides rich, up-to-date information about parents' views and experiences of, and engagement with, their children's education and school.

We address the following questions in this report:

- How involved are today's fathers (i) in their children's home learning and (ii) with their children's school?
- What are the barriers to fathers' home and school involvement?
- If fathers are involved at home, are they more likely to take part in school-based activities?
- What influences fathers' school involvement?
- What could schools and early education providers do to better engage fathers to be involved?

While our primary focus is on fathers, we also consider mothers to explore potential gender-based differences in the drivers and barriers to participation in a child's education and school.

[1] The PIECE study was funded by the ESRC Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (2021-23) and analysed data from the 2005-06 Millennium Cohort Study in England

[2] www.gov.uk/government/news/over-2-billion-boost-to-secure-expansion-in-early-education

2. What did we do?

Our method was the analysis of a representative survey of UK parents who had at least one dependent child (aged 16 or under).

We use data from Parentkind's 2023 National Parent Survey (NPS)[3]. Parentkind, formerly known as the 'National Association of Parent Teacher Associations', is one of the largest national charities comprising 12,500 PTA members in the UK (www.parentkind.org.uk). The sample we use from the 2023 NPS which includes 4,540 parents of at least one child aged 4 to 16 attending primary or secondary school in the UK[4]. Table 1 summarises the sample.

Table 1: Attributes of the sample of parents from Parentkind's 2023 NPS.

Age	%
18-34	15.3
35-44	40.7
45-54	33.8
55+	10.2
Social grade[1]	
ABC1	54.4
C2DE	45.6
Annual household income	
Under £20,000	13.5
£20,000-£34,999	21.6
£35,000-£49,999	20.5
£50,000-£99,999	34.3
£100,000+	10.1
Number of children	
1	35.0
2	48.5
3 or more	16.5
School phase of the eldest child	
Primary (aged 4-11 years old)	42.2
Secondary/Post primary (aged 11-16 years old)	47.1
Further/Third level education (aged 16+ years old)	10.8
Marital status	
Partnered	85.6
Single/Divorced/Separated	14.5
Work status	
Full time	61.0
Part time	23.5
Not in working status	15.6
Region in which parent lives	
England	60.0
Wales	15.0
Scotland	19.9
Northern Ireland	5.1

Note: Social Grade is defined as ABC1 (higher, intermediate, and junior managerial, administrative, or professional occupations) and C2DE (skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled manual workers; casual workers; and those dependent on state benefits). Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

[3] The 2023 NPS is conducted by YouGov and included 5,126 parents across England who had a dependent child aged between 4 and 18. The survey was in the field from 5th to 26th June and measures parents' views and experiences related to their children's education, such as parent involvement, mental health, the cost-of-living crisis, and school aJendance. For further details about the NPS, please see www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/parent-voice-reports

[4] Our sample excluded 11.4% of parents from the total NPS sample who only had one child aged over 16 in further education. This is because the involvement activities measured by the NPS are arguably less applicable to older age children (aged 17-18) who are more dependent in terms of their education and development. Of the 4,540 parents, 60% were from England (n = 2,724), 19.9% from Scotland (n = 905), 15% from Wales (n = 681), and 5.1% from Northern Ireland (n = 230).

In our sample, over a third (35%) of parents had only one child while 65% of parents had two or more children. Of the parents with only one child, 16% were in primary school (aged 4-11) and 19% were in secondary school (aged 11-16). Most of the parents (85.6%) in our sample were partnered and working full-time (61%). Just over half of parents (54.5%) were from higher social grades (ABC2).

2.1 How is fathers' and mothers' home and school involvement measured?

Home and school involvement is measured by several different questions (variables) from the NPS.

(i) Home involvement is captured by nine variables that measure how often fathers and mothers engage in educational activities with their child in or around the home. These measure how often each parent: (i) supports a child with homework, (ii) participates in learning activities as a family outside of school (such as visits to museums or nature walks), (iii) engages in family activities for fun and bonding, (iv) reads with or to their children for fun, (v) discusses books or relevant current affairs topics, (vi) supports their children during tests, assessments, or exams (e.g., helps plan a revision timetable, set up an appropriate study space, or provides emotional support), (vii) ensures the environment where their children do homework is appropriate and well-organised, (viii) speaks to their child about the school day, and (ix) coaches their children on issues they may be having at school.

Parents can respond to each question by saying they did the activity '*daily*', '*weekly*', '*monthly*', '*every 2–3 months*', '*every 6 months or less often*', or they could say *'I have never done this but would consider doing it*','*I have never done this and would not consider doing this*' or '*I don't know*'.

(ii) School involvement is captured by nine variables that measure how often fathers and mothers get involved in activities connected to the child's school. These measure how often each parent: (i) volunteers time and skills to the school (e.g., helps in the classroom or attends school

trips); (ii) serves as a school governor or trustee; (iii) is a member of a group that encourages closer links with the school, such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Friends of the School group; (iv) attends parents' evenings or parent-teacher meetings; (v) participates in groups that discuss and influence issues affecting their child's school and education (e.g., Parent Council or Parent Forum); (vi) has joined a group that campaigns alongside the school on specific issues (e.g., Parent Action Group); and (vii) takes part in parent surveys or focus groups.

Parents can respond to each question by saying '*I have done this in the last 6 months*', '*I have done this more than 6 months ago*', '*I have never done this but would consider doing it*', '*I have never done this and would not consider doing this*', and '*I don't know*'.

2.2 Generating a measure that captures *overall* involvement

For our analysis, we generate a composite measure for 'home involvement' that represents all the individual home involvement variables (described in section 2.1) added up, and a composite measure for 'school involvement' that represents all the individual 'school involvement' variables added up. We do this so we can analyse fathers' and mothers' *overall* home and school involvement.

We use the two composite measures in an ordinal logistic regression model, which is a statistical method that explores the relationship between home and school involvement whilst also accounting for other variables that might affect this relationship such as the number of children in the household and the parents' social grade and working status.

2.2.1 How is home and school involvement 'added up'?

For the composite *home involvement* measure, each individual *home involvement* activity was given a score to reflect how often a parent engages in that activity. These scores are listed in Table 2:

Table 2. Scores allocated to parent's responses to questions about their home involvement

Father/Mother response	Score
I don't know	0
I have never done this and would not consider doing it	0
I have never done this but would consider doing it	0
Every 6 months or less often	1
Every 2–3 months	2
Monthly	3
Weekly	4
Daily	5

The nine *home involvement* measures were then added together and divided by nine (i.e., the total number of measures) to provide an average (mean) *home involvement* score for each parent.

The composite measure of *school involvement* was constructed differently from the home involvement measure due to the distribution of responses to it. Most fathers (and mothers) said they had never done the activity (and would either consider or not consider doing it), which meant that the individual school involvement variables were skewed, with the majority of fathers and mothers scoring zero.

Our solution was to measure the total number of school involvement activities the father had participated in. To do this, we first recoded each

response into a binary indicator where a value of 1 was assigned if the respondent had participated in the activity within the last six months or more than six months ago and a value of 0 was assigned if they had not. This is illustrated in Table 3. All the individual school involvement variables were then added up.

Table 3. How each school participation variable was coded

Frequency that the activity has been done	Yes
I have done this in the last 6 months	1
I have done this more than 6 months ago	1
I have never done this but would consider doing it	0
I have never done this and would not consider doing it	0
I don't know	0

The resulting composite school involvement measure was therefore a score that ranged from 0 to 7, which indicated the total number of school-based activities that the parent had participated in. A score of 0 means that the parent did not participate in any school-based activity and a score of 7 means that the parent had participated in all school-based activities at some point (in the last six months or more than six months ago).

The next section describes what we found using both the individual and composite measures of home and school involvement.

3. Findings - are fathers involved and what are the barriers?

Findings from our data analysis show that fathers are less likely than mothers to participate in school-based activities but are more likely to say they would consider getting involved if they had the opportunity

3.1 How involved are today's fathers?

Table 4 shows the average (mean) scores for fathers and mothers' overall home and school involvement (using the two composite measures described in section 2).

Table 4. Fathers and mothers' average (mean) scores for their home and school involvement.

	Fathers	Mothers
Average (mean) Home involvement, (SD)	4.3 (1.1)	4.5 (0.9)
Average (mean) School involvement, (SD)	2.3 (1.7)	2.7 (1.6)

Note: SD = Standard Deviation (shown in brackets). This shows how dispersed the data is from the mean. A SD of 1.1., for example, indicates that data is scattered to a maximum of 1.1 units away from the mean on average. A small SD (of about 1) indicates that data points are all close to the mean therefore indicating that the mean is a good representation of the data. These statistics are weighted to be representative of the wide UK population.

On average, fathers were less likely to be involved at home and at school compared to mothers, as shown by their lower mean scores in Table 4.

While these mean scores provide an indication of fathers' and mothers' overall home and school involvement, it is also important to examine involvement in specific activities, as fathers may be more engaged in some types of activities compared to others.

Next, we explore fathers who report high levels of involvement—those who engage in their child's home learning activities daily or have participated in a school-based activity within the past six months. While we acknowledge that fathers can participate less than this but still be involved, our aim is to understand the factors that enable or hinder fathers from engaging as fully as possible in both home and school settings.

(i) Involvement at home

Table 5 presents the proportion of fathers and mothers who report engaging in each home-learning activity on a daily basis, along with the percentage-point gap in involvement, calculated by subtracting the proportion of mothers from that of fathers.

Table 5. The percentage of fathers and mothers' who say they contribute to home learning activities every day.

	Does the activity every day		
	% fathers (n= 2,239)	% mothers (n= 2,301)	Difference (% fathers - % mothers)
Supporting my child with homework	22.4	29	-6.6
Doing learning activities as a family outside of school (e.g. visits to museums, nature walks, etc.)	4.8	4.1	+0.7
Doing activities as a family for fun and to spend time together	14.7	15.3	-0.6
Reading with (and to) my child for fun	28	39.3	-11.3
Discussing books or relevant current affairs topics	27.5	39.5	-12
Supporting my child during tests/assessments/exams (e.g. helping them plan a revision timetable, set up an appropriate studying space, supporting them emotionally, etc.)	18.3	21.6	-3.3
Ensuring the environment where child does his/her homework is appropriate and well organised	31.3	34.1	-2.8
Speak to their child about their school day	75.8	89.7	-13.9
Coach them on issues they may be having at school	34.9	48.4	-13.5

Note: Data is weighted.

Fathers are less likely to report doing every activity every day compared to mothers, apart from learning activities as a family outside of school - the only activity where a slightly higher proportion (<1%) of fathers do this compared to mothers.

> "On average, fathers were less likely to be involved at home and at school compared to mothers

There were big differences in how often fathers and mothers spoke to children about the school day, coached children on issues they may be having at school, discussed books or relevant current affairs topics and read with and to children for fun with a much higher proportion (over 10% more) of mothers engaging on a daily basis in these activities compared to fathers. For example, almost half of mothers coached their children on issues they may be having at school every day compared to about a third of fathers; while 39.3% of mothers read with or to their child every day compared to 28% of fathers.

(ii) School involvement

Table 6 shows the proportion of fathers and mothers reporting that they have been involved in each school-based activity in the last 6 months, and the percentage gap difference, calculated by subtracting the percentage of mothers from the percentage of fathers.

Fathers are less likely than mothers to report participating in all school-based activities, with two exceptions: being part of a group that campaigns alongside the school on a specific issue and

serving as a school governor or trustee. These are incidentally more strategic, decision-making positions with influence and authority that align more closely with traditional male gender norms. The proportion of fathers who report that they have done these two activities in the last 6 months is about 2% higher than mothers.

Table 6. The percentage of fathers and mothers' who say they have participated in school activities in the last 6 months.

	Has done the activity in the last 6 months		
	% fathers (n= 2,239)	% mothers (n= 2,301)	Difference (% fathers - % mothers)
Volunteering my time and skills to my child's school (e.g. helping in the classroom, attending school trips etc.)	11.6	15.4	-3.8
Being a school governor/trustee	5.8	4.1	+1.7
Being a member of a group that encourages closer links with school, including fundraising (e.g. Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Friends of the School group)	8	10.1	-2.1
Attending parents evening(s)/ parent teacher meeting(s)	60.5	78.8	-18.3
Being part of a group that discusses and influences issues affecting their child's school and education e.g. Parent Council, Parent Forum	8.6	10.2	-1.6
Being part of a group that campaigns alongside the school on a specific issue (e.g. Parent Action Group)	6	3.7	+2.3
Taking part in parent surveys/ focus groups	20.9	35.2	-14.3

Note: Data is weighted.

Table 6 shows that the biggest gap between fathers and mothers is attending a parent's evening or parent-teacher meeting: In the past six months, 60.5% of fathers reported attending a parents' evening or parent-teacher meeting—18.3 percentage points lower than mothers. While it is possible that some schools did not hold such meetings during this period, the data nonetheless indicate that fathers are significantly less likely than mothers to participate in this form of school engagement.

3.2 Do fathers want to get involved at school?

The NPS measures parents' willingness to become involved in school-based activities. Table 7 shows the proportion of fathers and mothers who report never having participated in each activity but would be open to doing so, along with the gender gap calculated by subtracting the proportion of mothers from that of fathers.

It is notable that fathers are more likely than mothers to report never having participated in most school-based activities but indicate they would consider doing so, with well over a third of fathers falling into this category. The only exceptions were 'being part of a group that campaigns alongside the school on a specific issue' and 'being a member of a group that discusses and influences issues affecting their child's school' although 43-47% of fathers still said that they would consider doing this.

Table 7. The percentage of fathers and mothers who have never taken part in each school-based activity but say they would consider it.

	Never done it but would consider it		
	% fathers (n= 2,239)	% mothers (n= 2,301)	Difference (% fathers - % mothers)
Volunteering my time and skills to my child's school (e.g. helping in the classroom, attending school trips etc.)	37.4	32.4	+5
Being a school governor/trustee	35.7	31.2	+4.5
Being a member of a group that encourages closer links with school, including fundraising (e.g. Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Friends of the School group)	38	33.9	+4.1
Attending parents evening(s)/ parent teacher meeting(s)	8.8	3.2	+5.6
Being part of a group that discusses and influences issues affecting their child's school and education e.g. Parent Council, Parent Forum	47.2	48.7	-1.5
Being part of a group that campaigns alongside the school on a specific issue (e.g. Parent Action Group)	43.4	45.4	-2
Taking part in parent surveys/ focus groups	41.7	35.5	+6.2

Note: Data is weighted.

> "Fathers are more likely than mothers to report never having participated in most school-based activities

Fathers who had never attended a parent's evening or parent-teacher meeting were 5.6% more likely than mothers to say they would consider doing so – although the overall proportion of fathers reporting this was rather small (at just under 9%).

This pattern suggests that fathers may encounter specific barriers that limit their involvement in school-based activities. In the following section, we examine parenting practices—rather than stated intentions—to better understand the factors that influence fathers' (and mothers') participation in school life.

3.3. What are the barriers to fathers' home involvement and school participation?

Barriers to fathers' home involvement and school participation are wide-ranging and we can look to previous research to explain some of this. For example, long employment hours have an impact on fathers' capabilities to be involved at home (e.g., see Norman, Elliot and Fagan 2014) and this may explain why over a fifth (27.7%) of fathers said they do not have enough time to get involved in home-learning activities (compared to 23% of mothers).

A lack of time was also the main reason that fathers gave for not getting involved in school-based activities with half of fathers saying this (although 48.6% of mothers also said lack of time was a barrier). Barriers to fathers' and mothers' school involvement is shown in Figure 1.

However, there was also a sense from some fathers that they had not received clear messages about how they could get involved, or information and support to encourage them to do so. Figure 1 shows that a quarter of fathers (25%) said they had never been asked to get involved by the school and 16.9% said they did not know how to get involved; a fifth (20%) were unsure about their role in school activities and 17.5% of fathers felt too intimidated.

Barriers to school involvement appear to be similar for mothers apart from more fathers reporting that they have not been asked to get involved by the school (25% compared to 18.1% of mothers). Mothers were also more likely than fathers to report feeling intimidated (22.3% compared to 17.5% of fathers) and to feel that the school did not want parents to get involved (11.1% compared to 9.1% of fathers).

Figure 1. The barriers to fathers' (and mothers') school involvement %.

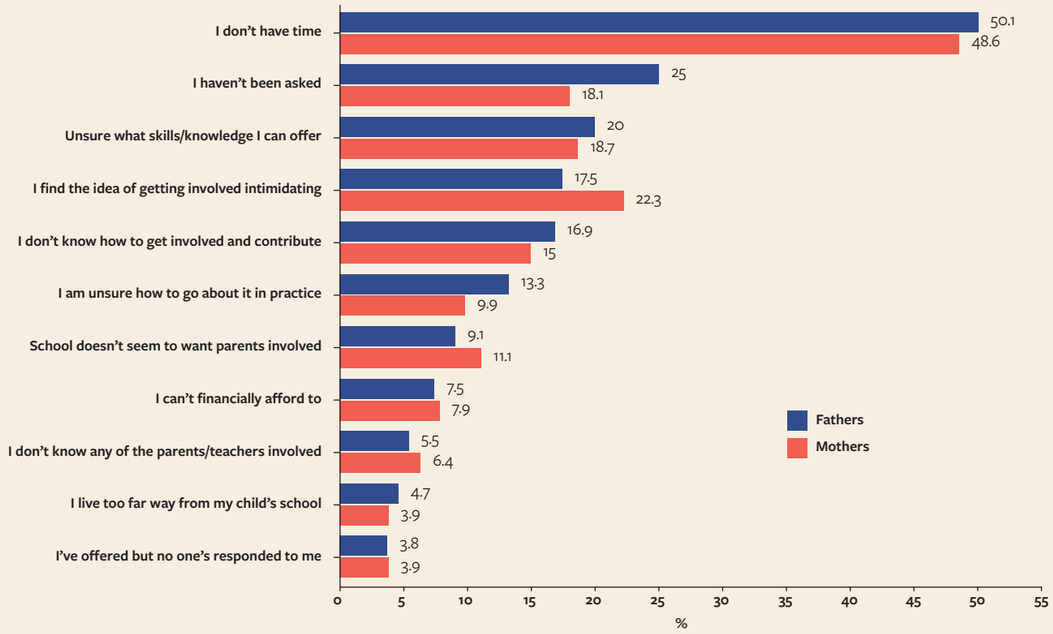
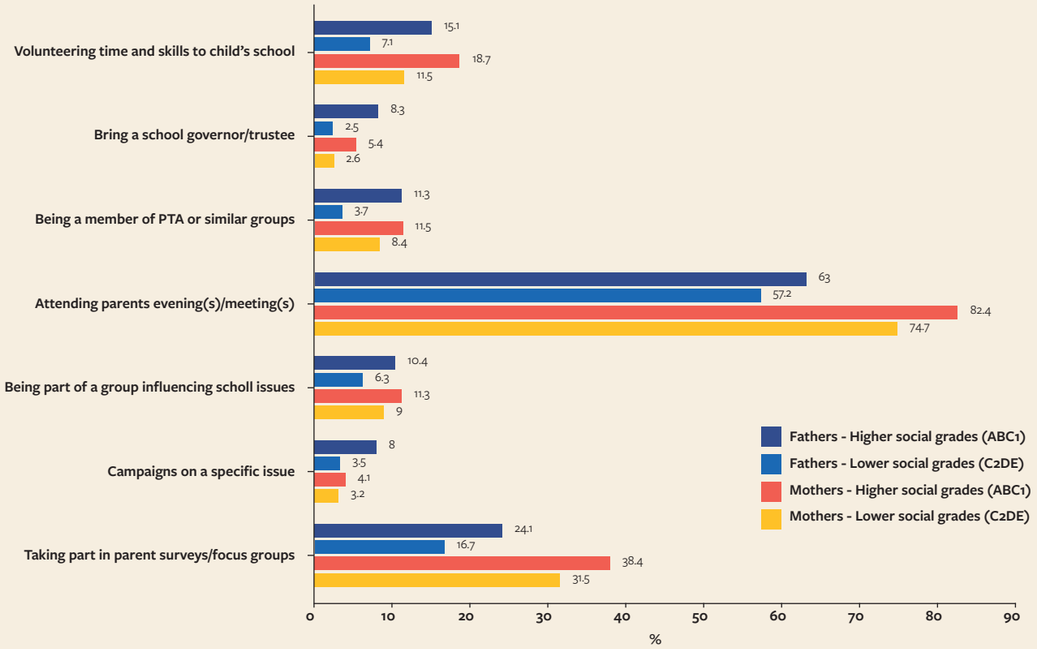


Figure 2. The percentage of fathers and mothers' engagement in school activities in the last six months across higher (ABC1) and lower (C2DE) social grades.



Note: ABC1 fathers (n=1,272); C2DE fathers (n=967); ABC1 mothers n=1,233; C2DE mothers n=1,068. Data is weighted.

There were also socio-economic differences in school involvement – as presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows that fathers from lower social grades were less likely to get involved in every school activity compared to their higher social grade counterparts. For example, over double the proportion of fathers from higher social grades (ABC1) volunteered their time and skills to their child's school in the last six months compared to fathers from lower (C2DE) social grades (15.1% compared to 7.1%). Fathers from higher social grades were over three times more likely than fathers from lower social grades to be a member of a PTA (11.3% compared to 3.7%) while fathers from higher social grades were more likely to have attended a parent's evening or parent-teacher meeting in the last six months compared to fathers from lower social grades (63% compared to 57.2%).

Although similar patterns emerge for mothers, lower social grade fathers are less likely to participate in every activity compared to lower social grade mothers (except for campaigning about a specific issue where the proportion of fathers and mothers from lower social grades getting involved in this activity is about the same at just over 3%).

The next section uses the composite measures of home and school involvement (described in section 2) in an ordinal logistic regression model to explore what might influence fathers' (and mothers') involvement in school-based activities.

3.4. What influences fathers' school involvement?

An ordinal logistic regression is a statistical model used to understand the relationship between one main outcome (called the dependent variable) - 'fathers' school involvement' - and several other variables that might influence it (called independent variables).

The main independent variable in our model is the composite measure of fathers' home involvement because we want to see if this is associated with fathers' school participation even when we take account of other things that might affect how much he participates in school-based activities - such as his working status, his age, household income and whether any of his children are in primary or secondary school. This type of model also shows the extent to which some of the barriers that a father reports to be important - such as a lack of time - are actually associated with lower levels of school involvement in practice.

Table 8 shows the results of the regression model which shows odds ratios for fathers and an identical model that shows odds ratios for mothers so that the possible influences on fathers and mothers' involvement can be compared.

What are Odds Ratios?

Odds ratios (ORs) help us understand the strength of the relationship between two variables. They compare the odds of something happening in one group to the odds of it happening in another.

- An OR of 1 means there is no difference between groups.
- An OR greater than 1 means the event is more likely in the first group.
- An OR less than 1 means the event is less likely in the first group.

For example, an OR of 1.5 means the event is 50% more likely to happen in the first group, while an OR of 0.7 means it is 30% less likely to happen.

In our analysis, many variables are binary (coded as 0 = not true, and 1 = true). These are the two groups we compare. For instance, the variable 'I don't have time' is coded as 1 if the father answered 'yes' (this is true) and 0 if he answered 'no' (this is not true). So, if we find an odds ratio of 0.56, this means that fathers who said 'yes' (they don't have time) were less likely to be involved in school activities than those who said 'no'.

Odds ratios are useful in understanding factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of an outcome, such as parental involvement in school activities

Table 8. What influences fathers' (and mothers') school participation?

	Fathers	Mothers
Home involvement (average score)	1.56 (.08)***	1.64 (.09)***
Reported barriers		
I don't have time	.56 (.06)***	.62 (.06)***
I know I can get involved and contribute to my child's school, but I am unsure how to go about it in practice	1.91 (.26)***	1.14 (.19)
I find the idea of getting involved intimidating	1.09 (.13)	.72 (.07)**
I haven't been asked	.57 (.06)***	.67 (.08)***
I've offered but no one's responded to me	1.90 (.50)*	4.16 (1.05)***
I don't know any of the parents/teachers involved	.60 (.10)**	.73 (.12)
Perceptions about school support		
My child's school communicates well with parents	1.12 (.05)**	1.06 (.04)

Note: The analysis is weighted. Standard errors in parentheses.
*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

The model controls for: age of the parent, number of children in the household, marital status, social grade, working status of the parent and school phase of the eldest child. These variables are not shown in the Table.

> "Fathers who were active at home tended to be significantly more active at school.

Table 8 shows that fathers who were involved at home were over 1.5 times more likely to get involved in school activities — regardless of their age, household income, working status, social grade, or number of children. In short, fathers who were active at home tended to be significantly more active at school. The same is true for mothers although the effects were slightly bigger (mothers were 1.6 times more likely to get involved at school if they were involved at home). This finding highlights an important opportunity: encouraging parental involvement at home may help to strengthen engagement at school, and vice versa.

> **“The likelihood of fathers participating in school activities increased by 12% when they perceived school-parent communication as effective.**

Perceived barriers seem to play a significant role in limiting school involvement. For fathers, practical barriers such as lack of time and not being directly invited by the school were strongly associated with lower involvement at school. For example, the odds of fathers getting involved at school nearly halved when they reported they had a lack of time, and the odds fell by 43% if they were not directly asked to get involved by the school. These barriers were similar for mothers, but the effects were weaker suggesting these barriers are more impactful for fathers. Knowing fewer people at the school (e.g., teachers or other parents) also lowers the odds of fathers getting involved in school-based activities by 40% but this has no significant association with mothers’ school involvement.

Interestingly, some perceived barriers were associated with a higher likelihood of school involvement. Fathers who said they know how they can get involved and contribute to their child’s school but are unsure how to go about it in practice were almost twice as likely to get involved at school compared to those fathers who did not say this.

Fathers who said that they offered to help but received no response were also twice as likely to get involved at school compared to those fathers who did not say this. Some of these patterns were seen among mothers – who were 4.16 times more likely to get involved if they offered to help but the school did not respond. This suggests that willingness and motivation might be key drivers of participation, even when other practical barriers (non-response and uncertainty) exist.

Feeling intimidated was only significantly associated with lower school involvement among mothers, reducing their odds of her getting involved by 28%. This may suggest that a lack of confidence about how to get involved at school is more commonly experienced by women.
The likelihood of fathers participating in school activities increased by 12% when they perceived school-parent communication as effective.
This suggests that clear, consistent, and inclusive communication is a key driver of father involvement — and appears to matter even more for fathers than for mothers.

4. Summary and conclusions

Understanding what drives fathers' participation in school activities matters. This is because fathers' school involvement signals the value of education to children, and fathers are more likely to support their child's learning positively when guided by school resources, which potentially benefits children's development and behaviour over time.

Increased father participation in school activities can also challenge traditional caregiving roles, easing the burden on mothers and promoting greater gender equality in caregiving responsibilities.

Although fathers are more involved in caregiving than previous generations (e.g., see Altintas and Sullivan 2017), our analysis shows they still participate less than mothers in both home and school activities. Fathers were less likely to talk with children about their school day, help with school-related issues, read to and with children for fun daily, attend parent evenings or meetings, and volunteer at their child's school.

There were also socio-economic differences in school involvement with fathers from lower social grades less likely to get involved in every school activity compared to their higher social grade counterparts.

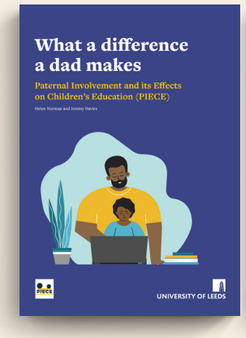
Despite this, fathers showed a greater willingness to participate in school activities, indicating that barriers may be preventing them from engaging as much as they would like.

Parental involvement in school is shaped by a complex mix of home engagement, perceived barriers, motivation, and communication — with notable gender differences. Fathers who are active at home were much more likely to be active at school. This suggests that supporting fathers to engage in child's care and education at home may be one way to help to enhance their engagement with a school.

Practical barriers such as lack of time, not being directly asked, and limited social connections within the school significantly reduce fathers' participation. Although similar barriers exist for mothers, the effects seem to be weaker suggesting such barriers are more impactful for fathers. Interestingly, parents who express a desire to help — even if unsure how or faced with no response — are more likely to be involved, suggesting that motivation and intent are strong predictors of school involvement. For mothers, feelings of intimidation reduce involvement, pointing to the need for confidence-building approaches.

Finally, effective school-parent communication increases the likelihood of fathers' involvement, reinforcing the importance of inclusive, proactive, and clear outreach from schools. Indeed, it seems that some fathers are not getting clear messages about how they could get involved, or information and support to encourage them to do so. Together, these findings highlight that building stronger home-school links, supporting parent motivation, and removing practical and emotional barriers can help boost parental participation — but especially amongst fathers.

5. What could schools and early education providers do to better engage fathers?



PIECE study report and guides

Based on our findings, we recommend the following actions to support and promote fathers' involvement in school-based activities:

- Supporting fathers to be involved in home learning activities is important as this could help to enhance their engagement with the school. We set out a range of recommendations for government, practitioners and fathers to help support fathers' childcare engagement at home in our PIECE study report (https://piecestudy.org/toolkit) and guides.

- Schools and early years providers could help to engage fathers by addressing them directly in their communications, providing resources and activities that encourage dads to participate and running father-targeted events and activities.

- Fathers who feel more confident about getting involved at school and would like to - or even offer - help may be further encouraged to put this into action if there are more targeted improvements in school communication and responsiveness.

- A clear parent-focused communication strategy that allows schools to send messages to multiple parents per child, rather than a single contact – usually the mother – is important especially for children who split time between households, such as in cases of divorce or separation. This ensures all caregivers stay informed and engaged.

- It's important to recognize that fathers and mothers have varying amounts of time and resources to support their children's education, with individual and structural inequalities linked to socio-economic status and ethnicity affecting different parent groups.

- Designing school involvement activities that parents can do from home – without requiring significant time, travel, or expenses – may better suit working fathers and mothers. This flexible approach allows engagement at times that fit around work commitments and could be especially beneficial for parents with lower incomes or longer working hours.

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Wei Zhuang is a PhD student in Social Statistics at the University of Manchester. She is interested in issues of gender and family inequality. Her project, titled 'Parenthood, Behaviours in Paid and Unpaid Work, and Well-being Among Dual-earner Couples in the UK', uses large-scale nationally representative datasets and advanced quantitative methods to investigate these topics. Wei's research is funded by the ESRC North West Social Science DTP.

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