

Lit Scan

Facts & Figures from the Colorado Literacy Research Initiative

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Maternal Education More Powerful Predictor of Kindergartners' Reading Scores Than Family Type

Both family type (i.e., two parents, single mother) and maternal education are widely recognized predictors of a child's level of academic achievement.

The 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study's tested kindergartners' reading proficiency. Results indicate that maternal education is a far more powerful predictor of academic achievement than family type.

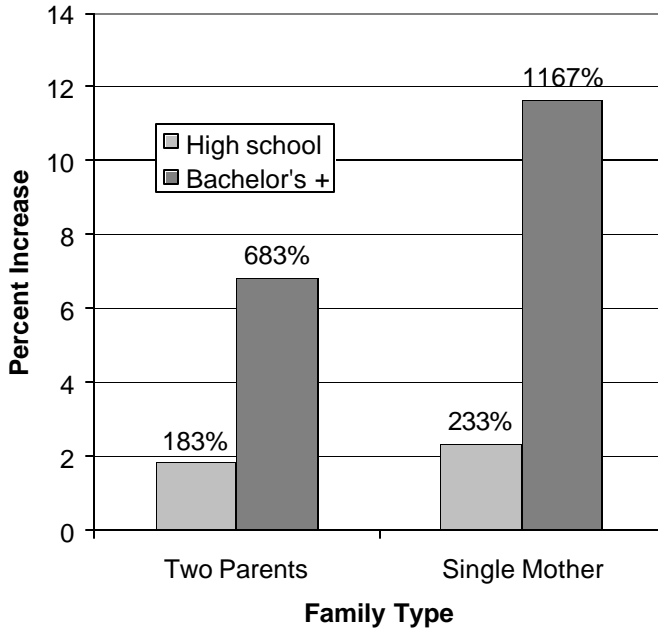
Highlights

- Single mothers who earn college degrees rather than drop out of high school increase their kindergartners' chances of being in the top quartile of readers more than 50 percent compared to two parent families.
- Controlling for maternal education, the advantage of children from two parent families is reduced by 75 percent.

Percentage Distribution of Kindergartners' Reading Scores by Family Type and Maternal Education, Fall 1998

Reading scores by family type & quartile	Maternal Education			
	Less than high school	High school	Some college	Bachelor's degree or higher
Two Parents				
0-25	50%	30%	19%	8%
26-50	27	28	25	17
51-75	17	25	27	28
76-100	6	17	29	47
Single Mother				
0-25	59%	39%	28%	10%
26-50	24	29	31	22
51-75	13	21	23	29
76-100	3	10	18	38

Maternal Education Boosts Higher Percentages of Kindergartners Into Top Quartile of Readers in Single Mother Than Two Parent Families, Fall 1998



Those results further indicate that increased maternal education goes far in closing the reading proficiency gap between children of single mother and two parent families.

When the reading scores of children from two parent and single mother families are examined by family type, children of single mothers are more likely to be among the poorest readers. Maternal education, however, boosts the scores of children from single-mother families into the top quartile of readers at a higher rate than for two-parent families.

Children of two-parent families are almost three times as likely

to be among the top scoring readers if their mothers graduated from high school rather than dropped out. They are almost eight times as likely to be top readers if their mothers hold college degrees.

Impressive as these gains are, they are outstripped considerably by the proportional gains of single-mother children based on maternal education.

Children of single mothers are more than three times as likely to be top scoring readers if their mothers graduated from high school rather than dropped out and almost 13 times as likely to be top readers if their mothers are college graduates.

Thus, when mothers hold college degrees, kindergartners from single mother families are over 50 percent more likely to earn top reading scores than children from two parent families.

These remarkable gains are a result of the decreasing advantage of two parent families over single mother families as maternal education increases.

Among both types of families where mothers did not graduate from high school, kindergartners from two parent families are twice as likely to be among the top scoring readers as children of single mothers.

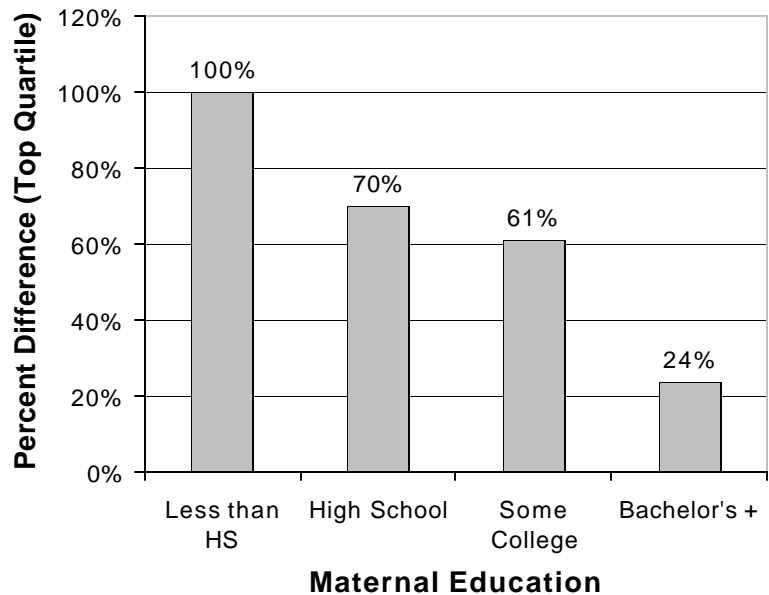
That advantage diminishes to 70 and 61 percent greater chances of being a top reader if the child's mother graduated from high school or attended some college.

Among both types of families where mothers hold college degrees, kindergartners of two parent families are only 24 percent more likely to be top readers. That represents a reduction of the two parent family advantage by more than 75 percent.

Certainly, two parent families offer young children many advantages over families headed by single mothers. What this analysis shows, however, is that maternal education exerts an even stronger influence on the reading proficiency of kindergartners than family type. Indeed, as maternal education increases, the two parent family advantage declines dramatically.

These findings suggest that public policy that encourages parents who dropped out of high school or college to return and complete their own education is likely to have a dramatic effect on the achievement levels of their children—as early as kindergarten. Such policy could go far toward closing the achievement gap between children from two parent and single mother families.

Reading Score Advantage of Kindergartners from Two Parent Families Over Single Mother Families Declines as Maternal Education Rises, Fall 1998



SOURCES

- Special tabulation produced at the request of the author (e-mail attachment from Kristin Denton, American Institutes for Research, March 10, 2000). Based on data collected and summarized in:
- National Center for Education Statistics. **America's Kindergartners**. *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Class of 1998-99, Fall 1998. Statistical Analysis Report, February 2000*. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000070.pdf>

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