

# Exploring parental expectations for children's educational degree attainment and its relationship with a child's actual educational degree, parental involvement in the college search process, and a child's overall well-being

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## Abstract

As adolescents' transition from high school to college, they gain a level of independence. Therefore, the college search process is an important steppingstone in transition to adulthood. In observing this process, it is important to analyze parental involvement and parental expectations. This is because a potential relationship between the two variables could explain the current increase of parental involvement, as well as the stress associated with the college search process. The recent Varsity Blues College Scandal has shed light onto the increase in parental involvement; however, a gap in the literature remains on this topic. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to determine if parental expectations are predictive of a child's educational attainment, parental involvement in the college search process, and a child's overall well-being. Additionally, this study explored the impact of confounding variables on these relationships. Using an archived data set from the University of Minnesota's Twin and Family Research Center, it was determined that parental expectations are predictive of a child's educational degree and parental involvement in the college search process. Additionally, well-

being was greater when a child exceeded their parents' expectations but somewhat less when a child fell short or met parents' expectations. Results from this study are extremely valuable as college admissions competition continues to intensify. Understanding the relationship explored in this study may prove useful in mitigating stress amongst students and helping parents find the appropriate balance of involvement in one of their child's most important steppingstones to adulthood.

*Keywords: College search process, parental expectations, educational attainment*

## Introduction

High school is a time when adolescents are guided by their teachers and parents; however, as they enter college, they gain a level of independence ("The Transition"). The college search process is an important steppingstone in this transition to adulthood; however, this process is currently extremely stressful for students. Since 2007, Challenge Success, a nonprofit organization affiliated with Stanford University, has asked over 100,000 high school students, "What currently stresses you the most?" The most popular response is a heavy school workload

followed by the college search process (“A Fit Over Rankings”).

It is extremely important to analyze parental involvement in this pivotal process. Currently, there is a spectrum of parental involvement, ranging from overly involved (helicopter parents) to barely involved or “hands off” (Galindo, 2016). Ultimately, it is necessary for parents to find the appropriate balance of involvement as this would allow the transition from high school to college to be less stressful for children. As of yet, however, research has not identified the ideal set of parenting behaviors.

Research suggests that characteristics such as the ability to understand different perspectives, empathy and responsibility are vital to success; however, some parents tend to disregard these traits during challenging phases, such as the college search process (Taylor, Durlak, Oberle & Weissberg, 2017). They instead focus on colleges’ selectivity. Many parents rely on college rankings to define a university’s merit; the higher the ranking, the more prestigious the school (“A Fit Over Rankings”). The recent Varsity Blues College Scandal has shed light upon the extent to which overly involved parents will orchestrate their child’s lives. On the other hand, less than half of parents with an annual income of \$30,000 a year or less expect their children to earn a bachelor’s degree, while 70% of parents who make \$75,000 or more have this same expectation (Child Trends, 2015). Additionally, compared to high SES parents, low-SES parents are less likely to be involved in their child’s education (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). Thus, to comprehend parental involvement, we need to understand the determinants of parental expectation and involvement.

Looking at the relationship between parents and their children is challenging. It is extremely difficult to draw correlations from observing parent-offspring relationships due to reverse causation and genetic confounding (McGue, Osler & Christensen, 2010). One way to address this issue is through longitudinal studies of adopted and non-adopted offspring, which is the central process of this study. This research approach is helpful because longitudinal studies

help address temporal sequencing as well as reverse causation. Additionally, genetic confounding does not exist in adoptive families.

This study will explore if parental expectations are predictive of parental involvement in the college search process and a child’s educational attainment. Additionally, this study will determine if there is an association between parental expectations and a child’s well-being. Ultimately, this study aims to provide knowledge that will make the college search process less stressful and healthier for all students. Since many high school students identify the college search process as a common stressor, this study provides extremely valuable information (“A Fit Over Rankings”).

## Review of Literature

Parental academic expectations are the hopes regarding children’s academic success. It has been determined that parental expectations influence children’s academic success and are based on a variety of factors, including parents’ experiences, culture, and socioeconomic status (Johnson, McGue & Iacono, 2007). For example, parents who graduated college tend to hold that expectation for their children; whereas, in cultures where higher education is less frequent, parents may not have that expectation. Parental expectations tend to be positively associated with academic achievement.

### *Parental Expectations and Child Well-Being*

Generally, parental academic expectations and child well-being are positively associated (Lu, Nie & Sousa-Poza, 2020). This positive association is indicated through an increase in children’s self-esteem, life satisfaction, and lower anxiety levels. However, high parental expectations can be detrimental to adolescents’ well-being. Falling short of parents’ expectations, may lead to stress and a lack of self-confidence (Ang & Huan, 2006). Research has shown that parental involvement can have the same impact on children.

### *Parental Involvement*

In this field of research, parental involvement is measured by active participation in their child’s life. Examples of involvement include

a parent calling their child's teacher, controlling their child's social life, or even the college search process. Parental academic involvement is commonly measured through attendance at school meetings, events, and parent-teacher conferences. In general, parental involvement varies and influences children differently.

Muller found that when children communicated with their parents about school, their academic performance increased (Muller, 1998) and dropping out of school decreased (11% decrease and 16% decrease, respectively). A positive association between parental involvement, grades, and homework quality was also found (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987). Children with involved parents received higher grades in core courses, compared to those with uninvolved parents (Kang & Moore, 2010). However, too much involvement may not be beneficial. Thus, a critical exploration of parental involvement, specifically in regard to college admissions, will help us understand its impact on children's academic performance.

#### *Ranges of Parental Involvement*

Parental involvement is important for a child to be successful (Avvisati, Besbas, & Guyon, 2010); however, it is suspected that success is seen when parental involvement and child independence are balanced. There is a spectrum of parental involvement, ranging from highly involved parents to lowly involved parents. Neglectful or uninvolved parenting is characterized by low levels of warmth and control (Hong, 2012). As a result, children tend to make poor decisions because they lack parental guidance. Additionally, a study of 2,409 students found that uninvolved parenting was significantly negatively associated with academic performance ( $p < .05$ ). Students noted that their neglectful parents did not care about their academic and social well-being, which harmed their academic achievement (Odongo, Aloka, Raburu, 2016).

There is currently a dearth of literature on neglectful parents' involvement in the college search process; however, current literature explores parental involvement in low SES. Although we cannot assume that neglectful

parenting and low SES parenting are identical, there are similarities between the two. Therefore, based on current research, we can make assumptions about neglectful parents' involvement in the college search process. Low SES students are less likely to have access to information about college because they lack the digital literacy skills necessary to understand the information (Brown, Wohn, & Ellison, 2015). Additionally, low SES schools tend to lack resources, which negatively impacts students' academic achievement (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008).

Conversely, overly involved parents are referred to as helicopter parents. Helicopter parenting, named by Foster Cline and Jim Fay in 1990, is defined as a form of over-parenting in which parents are highly involved in all aspects of their children's lives (Givertz & Segrin, 2012). Although helicopter parenting intends to protect children from negative outcomes and ensure success, it is found to ultimately prevent children from taking responsibility for their actions (Givertz & Segrin, 2012). According to a 2019 University of Michigan poll on children's health, out of 2,032 parents, one quarter said they are the main barrier to their child's independence ("Parent Efforts Insufficient to Promote Teen Independence"). Additionally, some helicopter parents may cross the line into unethical areas (Vinson, 2012). This issue became extremely prevalent in the recent Operation Varsity Blues College Scandal.

#### *The Operation Varsity Blues College Scandal*

The Operation Varsity Blues College Scandal involved 50 parents who took unethical and illegal action to get their children into selective universities (Miller & Bromwich, 2019). This scandal supports the theory that current college students are the most overprotected generation (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). One reason for this may be that today, Americans trust each other less. In 1972, 46% of Americans said they trusted others, whereas in 2012, this declined to 32% (Chae, 2019). Since Americans trust each other less, parents may place more restraints on their children and be more involved in their children's lives (Chae, 2019). Parental involvement therefore may be impacted by confounding variables such as lack of trust. These

confounding variables could influence parental involvement. Therefore, this study will take into account confounding variables in the analyses.

### *Confounding Variables*

Regardless of parenting styles, there are various factors that may impact all parents' expectations and involvement such as a child's sex, adoption status, grade point average (GPA), IQ, and motivation. For example, sex is a confounding variable, as there are known differences in GPAs between females and males. Specifically, females have higher GPAs than males (Kimball, 1989); therefore, parents often have higher expectations for their daughters (Johnson, McGue & Iacono, 2006). Therefore, this study will further explore sex as well as other confounding variables to determine their influence on parental expectations and parental involvement.

### *Study Overview*

This study will utilize archived data from the Minnesota Twin and Family Research Center to determine if parental expectations of children's educational attainment are predictive of a child's actual educational attainment, parental involvement in the college search process, and a child's well-being. This study will also include confounding variables in the analyses. This study will utilize a sample of both adopted and non-adopted offspring. Understanding these relationships may mitigate stress in the college search process and improve the well-being of all. This is extremely valuable as research has shown that the college search process is more stressful than ever before.

### **Objectives**

1. To determine if there is a relationship between parental expectations of children's educational attainment and the child's actual educational attainment.
2. To determine if there is a relationship between parental expectations and parental involvement in the college search process.
3. To determine if these relationships differ depending on confounding variables

including the child's sex, adoption status, age, GPA, IQ, and motivation.

4. To determine the relationship between parental expectations and children's well-being.

### **Hypotheses**

H1: Parental expectations of children's educational attainment will be predictive of the child's actual educational attainment.

H2: Parental expectations will be predictive of parental involvement in the college search process because parents may become invested in their child's college search process as a result of their expectations.

H3: There will be a negative association between high parental expectations and the child's well-being due to the burden of falling short of high expectations.

### **Methods**

#### *Sample*

Data for this study came from an existing set of data from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS) conducted at my mentor's lab, the Minnesota Center for Twin and Family Research (Johnson, McGue & Iacono, 2007). The original sample included 1,232 offspring and their parents. Adopted offspring were identified through local adoption agencies and non-adopted offspring were obtained through Minnesota state birth records. Only participants with the dependent variable of interest, educational attainment, were used in the study. Thus, the original sample of 1,232 participants was reduced to 740. The new sample contains 282 males (38.1%) and 458 females (61.9%). Of these, 404 are adopted (54.6%) and 336 are non-adopted (45.4%).

#### *Measures*

Participants were seen three times and various assessments were conducted at each stage. At intake participants were on average 15 years old, 22 at the second follow-up, and at the final follow-up, participants were on average 32.

#### *Assessments at Intake*

The assessments, completed at intake, consisted of determining each participant's IQ,

motivation, grade point average (GPA), and parental expectations. Children under the age of 16 took the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised, while children older than 16 took the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised to determine IQ. Both assessments consisted of two verbal and two performance sub-scales.

Academic motivation was assessed using an eight-item questionnaire. The children completed the assessment, and each item was measured on a four-point scale. The scale measured effort (“turns in homework on time”) and motivation (“wants to earn good grades”) in schoolwork.

Academic achievement was reported through the mother. Parents reported their children’s language arts, math, social studies, and science grades by indicating they were much better than average (4), better than average (3), average (2), below average (1), or much below average (0). The average of the reported grades was then calculated to determine the child’s GPA.

To assess parental expectations, mothers were asked, when their children were adolescents, to predict how far they expected them to go in school. There were six different options including not completing high school (1), all of high school (2), high school plus trade school (3), some college (4), all of college (5), or lastly a graduate degree (6).

#### *Assessments at the Second Follow-Up*

Well-being was measured using the Minnesota Personality Questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted of 18 items and participants self-reported their responses. Each question was answered by true or false. Sample items on the questionnaire were “I often feel happy and satisfied for no particular reason” and “most mornings the day ahead looks bright to me”.

#### *Assessments at the Final Follow-Up*

Parental involvement in the college search process was assessed through self-report in both mothers and fathers. Both parents were given a seven-question survey analyzing their involvement in the college search process. Sample items assessed the importance to a parent that their child obtain a college degree, if a

parent visited schools with their child, or helped in reviewing their child’s application. Each response had a numerical value indicating the extent of parental involvement. After the survey was completed, the scores from each question were added to determine the total parental involvement.

The child’s educational attainment was determined by the child’s educational degree when they were in their 30’s at the final follow-up. Each option had a corresponding value: no high school degree (0), GED (1), high school degree (2), vocation or technicality (3), community college (4), four-year college (5), and masters or other graduate degree (6).

## **Results**

The first objective of this study was to determine if parental expectations are predictive of a child’s educational attainment. To do this, the correlation between the two variables was found and was significant ( $r = .386$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, parental expectations are likely predictive of a child’s educational attainment.

Next, the relationship between parental expectations and parental involvement in the college search process was determined. The correlation between parental expectations and both maternal and paternal college help was significant ( $r = .423$ ,  $r = .395$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Overall, both correlations indicate that parental expectations are predictive of parental involvement in the college search process.

The third objective was to analyze the impact of the confounding variables of age, sex, adoption status, GPA, motivation, and IQ. For example, with regards to GPA, mother’s expectations may be associated with educational attainment not because her expectations influence attainment but rather because her expectations are based on her child’s GPA. One way to test for this possibility is to include GPA in the analysis. It has already been determined that parental expectations are predictive of a child’s educational attainment and college involvement; however, after the confounders listed above were accounted for in the analysis, parental expectations still had a significant impact on the

variables (Table 1). Parental expectations remain significant in both models ( $p < .001$ ) indicating that the correlation is not due to confounders and is correlated on its own.

TABLE 1. Multiple linear regression analysis of gender, adoption status, age, GPA, motivation, IQ, and expectations with child's educational degree and college help.

Model, variable	Significance
1. Expectations in Mom	0.000
2. Expectations in Mom Sex of Offspring Adoption Status Age of Offspring	0.000
3. Expectations in Mom Sex of Offspring Adoption Status Age of Offspring GPA of Offspring Motivation of Offspring IQ of Offspring	0.000

The final objective of this study was to determine the relationship between parental expectations and a child's well-being. First, three groups were made: parental expectations are greater than a child's educational attainment ( $n = 116$ ), less than a child's educational attainment ( $n = 231$ ), or equal ( $n = 287$ ) (Table 2). Then, the mean well-being was determined for each cohort. When a child's educational attainment was equal to or less than their parent's expectations, their mean well-being score was slightly less than when a child exceeded expectations ( $\mu = 56.03, 56.37, 57.16$  respectively). Although a notable finding, these results are not significant and indicate that parental expectations do not play as large of a role in a child's well-being as hypothesized.

TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics of educational degree being greater than, less than, and equal to parental expectations.

Relationship	Number	Percentage
Educational outcome < mother's expectation Less than expectations	266	36.5%
Educational outcome > mother's expectation More than expectations	151	20.7%
Educational outcome = mother's expectation Equal to expectations	312	42.8%

## Discussion

In this study, parental expectations association with a child's educational attainment, parental involvement in the college search process, and well-being were analyzed. To our knowledge, this study was the first of its kind to examine these variables together, specifically parental involvement in the college search process.

### *Impact of Low Parental Involvement*

This study found that parental expectations are predictive of parental involvement in the college search process; however, this study did not explore the impact of low parental involvement on academic achievement. Previous research has associated low parental involvement with low SES and determined that children's SES is a significant academic achievement predictor (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). This is an issue, as low SES schools lack resources (Taylor, 2020). Additionally, low SES students face numerous barriers when applying to college. Low SES high schools have 1,000 students per guidance counselor, compared to a national average of 470 (American School Counselor Association, 2020). Improving low SES schools may assist in reducing these limiting factors, thus future research on SES and college access is essential.

### *Motivation for High Parental Involvement*

Results from this study also confirm the hypothesis that parental expectations are predictive of a child's educational attainment. This is not surprising, as previous research has shown when an emphasis is placed on succeeding academically, student's academic achievement reflects that. This result is very beneficial. If parents have high academic expectations, their child should meet those expectations. However, an important factor to analyze in this relationship is the motivation behind parental expectations.

### *Child Motivation: Intrinsic or Extrinsic*

An important issue addressed by researchers has been, are children intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to academically succeed? In a study by Lahey (2020), when students were asked about their motivation to get good grades, 15-20% said they get paid for good grades and 20-25% said they get rewarded in another way. This same study found that 80% of middle schoolers and 85-90% of high schoolers believed that their parents loved them more when they received good grades (Lahey, 2020). These results point to child motivation being extrinsic; however, Carol Dweck's work points in another direction. Dweck gave children problems to solve and watched how they coped with the challenges (Dweck, 2007). She noted those with a growth mindset understood that failure meant there is room to grow and therefore, they loved the challenge, while those with a fixed mindset believed intelligence was static, and thus, were frustrated by the challenge. Dweck found that your mindset predicts your achievement (Baer, 2014).

### *Limitations*

This research only begins to explore parental expectations and parental involvement in the college search process; and thus, moving forward, several issues should be addressed. Parental involvement in the college search process was self-reported. Parents may not think they were extremely involved and underestimate their input, or they may think they did nothing wrong. This was demonstrated by Lori Loughlin, who was involved in the recent college scandal. Sources reported, "she honestly didn't think what

she was doing was any different than donating money for a library or athletic field" (Strohm, 2019). Therefore, future researchers should gather data from multiple perspectives to eliminate bias. It is also important to note that the data on parental involvement and children's educational attainment was gathered at the final follow-up, at least 15 years ago. Since then, college admissions competition has substantially increased. Results from this current study do not capture this increased competition and therefore the correlations determined in this study would most likely increase if the study used current data. Overall, research on the college search process is still in its infancy and there are endless possibilities as to the direction of future research.

### **Conclusion**

Americans are extremely fortunate to live in an era where education is more available and widespread than ever before. With this however, parental expectations have steadily intensified. The increase in parental expectations is important to note when analyzing parental involvement in challenging processes, such as the college search process. Research has continued to analyze parental expectations and what factors influence it; however, the relationship between parental expectations and parental involvement tends to be overlooked. This study determines that there is in fact, a direct relationship between parental expectations and parental involvement that is not solely due to confounders. These are important findings.

In a time where a college degree is highly important and greatly desired, understanding the relationship between parental expectations and parental involvement in the college search process is more valuable than ever before. This study is important as through these results, the college search process can potentially become less stressful and improve young adults' well-being. In the end, this study is the first step in an extremely powerful direction as the more independent children are, the better equipped they will be for the future, impacting our society as a whole.

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