

The Influence of a Mother on a Daughter's College Decision



Utah Women and Education Project researchers conducted in-depth research in 2010 to discover why more young women around the state are not attending and graduating from college. We discovered that mothers in Utah influence their daughters' college choices and behaviors significantly when it comes to decisions about whether to attend college and persist until graduation.

A majority of the participants' mothers wanted their daughters to attend college. Some mothers wanted their daughters to become independent career women while others believed that a college degree should be used as a back-up plan in case their husbands were unable to care for them. Regardless of the mothers' intentions, simply wanting a daughter to attend college was not enough to motivate many young women to pursue a degree. Mothers who provided encouragement by actively engaging with daughters in a variety of activities significantly increased the daughters' chances of committing to and preparing for the higher education experience. These activities included:

- *Acting as an educational role model.* This was one of the most important things that mothers did to increase the chances of having their daughters commit to attend and graduate from college as well as prepare for college attendance.* Role models discussed college, attended themselves, placed high value on education, assisted their daughters in applying for financial assistance/college applications and visited campuses with them.
- *Helping with homework.* This was the most cited activity that mothers did to help their daughters develop a love of learning. Daughters who had assistance with their schoolwork were also significantly more likely to commit to attending college and preparing for college attendance.
- *Reading, praising good work, and encouraging good grades.* This increased the likelihood of having daughters be prepared for college.
- *Attending school activities* (e.g., field trips), *community and cultural events* (e.g., museums and art galleries), and *creating other learning events* (e.g., family vacations). Mothers who did these activities with their daughters made it more likely that daughters would prepare for college.

SAMPLE PARTICIPANT QUOTES

"My mom is the example in our family of completing college. She loved college. She was on the track team and graduated before she married my dad. I always wanted to be like my mom and play sports and go to college. Luckily she helped me to do that. She taught me how to read, and she helped me with and made sure that I always did my homework and turned it in. She encouraged me to get good grades and helped me in whatever way she could" [college graduate].

"When my mom went back to school and earned her bachelor's degree, it just influenced and empowered me even more, and I knew that I could go back and accomplish that too" [college graduate].

A Mother's Education

A mother's education level has a profound influence on the educational choices of her daughter(s). According to our data, the higher the educational attainment level of the mother, the more likely her daughter will:

- Actively prepare for college attendance.*
- Talk to her mother about college and be encouraged to attend.
- Develop a love of learning.
- Receive help with homework.
- Attend cultural, school, family, and community events.
- Have a mother who attended college later in life as a non-traditional student.

*Activities that prepared students for college attendance included the following: saving money, discussing financial aid, AP and concurrent enrollment courses, visiting a campus, requesting information from a college, applying to a college, being accepted to a college, and applying for and receiving scholarships or grants.

Participant Demographics

- 245 females; 18-32 year-olds
- 89.9% White; 80.4% LDS
- 44.1% married
- 16 counties, 56.2% from Salt Lake and Utah counties

Visit www.uvu.edu/wep for additional information about the research study.



Taking an Active Role

Everyone:

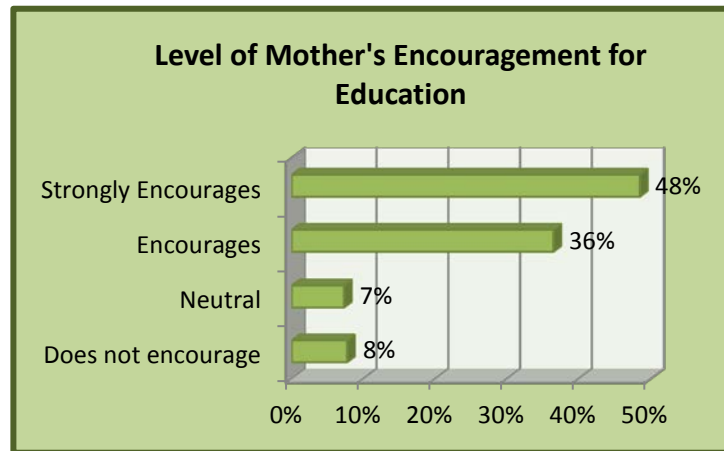
Help mothers recognize the significant role they play in influencing their daughters to attend and graduate from college.

Mothers:

- Talk frequently to your daughters, starting as young as possible, about attending and graduating from college.
- Encourage your daughters to open a college savings account while they are young and help fund it.
- Read to your daughters, help them with their homework, and participate in their school and social activities.
- Be an educational role model. Talk about your own college experiences, attend classes yourself, visit college campuses with your daughters, and help them apply for grants and scholarships.
- Advise your daughters that they can have both a satisfying family life and the benefits that education offers, such as financial stability, flexible work options, and increased quality of life.

Other Findings

The level of encouragement by the participants' mothers varied. Almost half of them (48%) believed that their mothers *strongly* encouraged them in their educational pursuits, and these young women were significantly more likely to be attending or to have graduated from college.



HIGHLIGHTS

- Mothers who talked to their daughters about college “often” (48%) were much more likely to have daughters who attended and graduated from college compared with those who talked to them “sometimes” (47%) or “never” (5%).
- Daughters of mothers who were not college-educated were still more likely to attend if their mothers shared with their daughters the regret they had for not attending, served as educational role models by attending themselves later in life, strongly encouraged their daughters toward college with hands-on assistance (e.g., help with financial aid and college applications), and talked to their daughters “often” about college.

SAMPLE PARTICIPANT QUOTES

“My mother absolutely helped us develop a love for learning. She was always supportive of school and served on the PTA and as a room mom. She also took us to a variety of places like museums, national monuments, parks, and on fun new vacations. We were always the family who stopped to read historical markers [college graduate]!”

“She has been a seamstress her whole life. She often encouraged me to go to college and was a living example of what happens when you do not get a good education” [current student].

“My mom knows college is important, and every day she regrets not finishing so that she could accomplish her dream. She regrets that decision and knows that she would have chosen differently if her parents had shown more encouragement while she was growing up” [college graduate].

“My mom encourages college but would rather have me be a good wife and mother. She always demonstrated and taught me that family is more important” [current student].

By Cheryl Hanewicz and Susan R. Madsen (madsensu@uvu.edu; 801.863.6176). Funding for this research was provided by Utah Valley University and many other generous donors (see website for full list). For more information visit www.uvu.edu/wep. Copyright © 2011 Utah Women and Education Project