

Family factors in early school leaving

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Young people who leave school early are at greater risk of experiencing long-term unemployment and slipping into social exclusion as a result. This paper looks at the risk factors associated with young people exiting the education system prematurely, particularly in a family context. The impact of parental separation and changes to family structure on academic outcomes, and the continued importance of parental involvement in education in the secondary school years are further explored. Key messages for child and family support practitioners who are working with families with adolescent children are provided.

KEY MESSAGES

- While school retention rates for Australia are at their highest levels ever, there are still significant numbers of young people who leave school early.
- Early school leavers are at greater risk of long-term unemployment, which in turn places them at a much higher risk for social exclusion, welfare dependence and mental health problems.
- Family-related risk factors for early school leaving include socio-economic status, residential mobility, parental education, parental separation, family structure and parenting practices.
- Other factors can add to the cumulative risk of early school leaving for young people with existing family risk factors, including gender, aspirations and attitudes to education, special needs, education and employment policies and school-level policies and environment.
- Parental separation in secondary school years, and the changing family structure as a result, may impact on the predictability of vital family functions that promote positive adolescent development, which in turn can influence academic achievement.
- While the nature of parental involvement in education changes in the secondary school years, it remains a significant protective factor for academic achievement.
- Parents who are negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements can be encouraged to remain involved in their adolescents' education, with "dinnertime discussions" seen as more effective in the adolescent years than helping with homework or voluntary roles at the school.

Introduction

Families play a pivotal role in child development and long-term outcomes. The provision of a warm, nurturing, encouraging and safe environment is crucial to a range of developmental tasks throughout childhood and adolescence.

Academic achievement is one outcome for which the cumulative impact of a range of family factors is crucial to good results. The ways in which a home environment promotes respect and enthusiasm for learning, along with the quality of the surrounding neighbourhood and available school options, all influence educational outcomes. By adolescence, these combined factors will be pivotal in decisions related to what could be described as the “third transition”, from secondary school to work or further learning. The timing of this decision is likely to have a lasting impact on long-term outcomes for young people.

This paper provides an overview of contributing factors to decisions to leave school before the completion of Year 12. The paper focuses predominantly on family-related factors, such as parental education, family structure, parenting practices, socio-economic status and parental separation and divorce. Broader individual and socio-cultural factors, such as gender, aspirations and school-based policies, are briefly reviewed to highlight the complexities of school leaving and give context to family factors.

Finally, consideration is given to how decisions related to schooling may arise in a family or child support service setting, such as within the context of post-separation interventions. Evidence-based messages are provided that may help families focus on a young person’s needs in times of stress or transition.

School retention rates in Australia

Figures published in 2009 showed school retention rates at their highest level ever recorded in Australia, with almost 83% of 20–24 year olds having completed Year 12 or an equivalent certificate. This places Australia on par with retention rates in countries such as France, Norway, and the United Kingdom, but still below countries such as the United States, Finland, Sweden and Korea (Robinson & Lamb, 2012) (see Table 1).

Table 1: School retention rates for OECD countries (2009)

Country	School Retention Rates (%)
Australia	83
Canada	92
Finland	90
France	84
Korea	98
Norway	84
Sweden	91
UK	82
US	88

Notes: OECD country comparisons in Table 1 are based on 2009 data, while current Australian research draws on 2012 data. Early school leaving in Robinson and Lamb’s (2012) report is defined by not being engaged in employment or continuing education (NEET).

One reason for the improvement in retention rates in Australia is the increased participation of young people in Vocational Educational and Training (VET) programs in schools (Robinson & Lamb, 2012). VET programs offer a range of alternate pathways to mainstream high school education, including: certificate qualifications, diplomas, advanced diplomas, and selective degrees. These alternative qualifications cover pre-vocational training, Australian apprenticeships and traineeships, basic vocational skills for particular occupations, semi-professional vocational training, and degrees with a practical focus (Hobsons, 2013). One of the reasons that VET is considered to have been successful, is because it integrates vocational options in combination with traditionally academic studies at the senior secondary school level (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012).

Early school leaving

Early school leaving has been described as a long-term and multi-dimensional process, rather than a single event, that

begins with a process of disengagement (Dale, 2010; Ferguson et al., 2005). An “early school leaver” in this paper refers to a young person who exits the school system without completing Year 12 or taking up an alternative pathway.

Young people who disengage from school early are at a high risk for poorer current and future employment prospects. For example, research shows that young people who complete Year 10 or 11, without taking up alternative pathways (VET), are one-and-a-half times less likely to be in full-time ongoing work or education, compared to those who complete Year 12. Data from the 2010 Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) revealed that among 22-year-olds who were not engaged in full-time employment or ongoing education, over one-third had left school in Year 9; 16.5% left in Year 10; and 11.3% left in Year 11 (Robinson & Lamb, 2012). Around half of young people who leave school early are likely to be disengaged from any form of education, training or work in the following year (Curtis & McMillan 2008).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, in particular, are over represented within early school leaver figures, at three times that of non-Aboriginal young people (Curtis & McMillan, 2008). Factors influencing school completion rates for Aboriginal young people are multi-dimensional, including physical (e.g., geographic location), cultural (e.g., discrimination), economic (e.g., costs of schooling), and informational (e.g., low levels of literacy) (Helme & Lamb, 2011).

Early school leavers are at much greater risk for remaining unemployed in the longer term, earning considerably lower wages when they are employed, and are likely to struggle to accumulate wealth over their life span (Deloitte Access Economics, 2012). Long-term unemployment can lead to many other risk factors for young people, including:

- social exclusion;
- long-term welfare dependence;
- reduced life satisfaction;
- mental health problems; and
- increased vulnerability to involvement in criminal activities.

Ultimately, these outcomes can result in higher costs to society in the form of health, welfare and criminal justice burdens (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [Cedefop], 2010).

Risk factors for early school leaving

Risk factors for early school leaving exist in many domains, from macro-economic policies to school environment, through to individual and family characteristics. This section highlights a range of risk factors that play a role in decisions to leave school early that are specifically related to family and family relationships.

We begin by examining factors that are unmodifiable, or less amenable to policy or practice responses, once a child is of secondary school age. However, while research indicates that patterns of educational performance are largely set in early childhood, it is important to remember that prior experiences do not always determine young people’s school careers, just as early childhood investments may be necessary but not sufficient in protecting children from later risk factors (Dale, 2010).

Outcomes related to family factors that may be amenable to change or intervention if they occur within the adolescent years, with the consequence that early school leaving may be averted or postponed are then considered. In particular, the impact of parental separation in the adolescent years is examined, and how parental involvement in education in adolescence is still important.

Parental education level

Lower levels of parental education have long been associated with poorer educational outcomes for young people (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Curtis & McMillan, 2008), and are linked to early school leaving (Dale, 2010; GHK, 2005; Traag & van der Velden, 2011).

In Australia, one study showed that two in 10 young people did not complete Year 12 when the highest level of education for either parent was a post-school VET qualification, compared to one in 10 young people who have at least one parent that has completed a university degree (Robinson & Lamb, 2012). In a Netherlands longitudinal study, Traag and van der Velden (2011) found that for each additional year of parent education, the risk of a young person dropping out of school decreases by approximately 7%.

Expectations for a child's educational achievements are also influenced by the parents' own levels of education, which may influence decisions to leave or stay at school. For example, data from Wave 3 of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children indicated that where the highest level of education between the two parents was at a tertiary level, 68% of mothers expect their child to complete a university degree, compared to 38% when the highest level of parental education was lower than Year 12 (McLaren, 2010).

There is some suggestion, however, that parental education has less of an influence when other factors are considered simultaneously. Homel, Mavisakalyan, Nguyen, and Ryan (2010), undertook a multivariate analysis of LSAY and Youth in Focus study data and suggested that parental education levels are less influential in decisions to leave school early than poor school experiences, participation in risky activities, and educational aspirations.

Family structure

Dimensions of various family structures are frequently used to describe associations with educational outcomes for young people, with those from non-nuclear families reported to be at greater risk for early school leaving (Dale, 2010; Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Ferguson et al., 2005; Mance & Yu 2010; Song, Benin, & Glick 2012; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). Outcomes from Australian studies include the following:

- Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth showed that 22% of young people from single parent and other non-intact family backgrounds do not complete year 12, compared to 13% of young people from intact families (Curtis & McMillan, 2008).
- Data from the Youth in Focus study showed that young people who left school having completed Year 10 or less were significantly more likely to be from step-mother (21%), step-father (16%), lone parent (10%) or "other" (e.g., foster) (13%) families than from intact nuclear families (5%) (Mance & Yu, 2010).

There is some suggestion, however, that after controlling for individual, family and neighbourhood characteristics, the effects of family structure on academic achievement are greatly diminished (Mance & Yu, 2010). This indicates that the structure of a family may be of less importance than the contextual experiences and transitions to which families—and subsequently young people—are exposed.

Socio-economic status

Having a higher socio-economic status has long been associated with greater educational attainment, both in Australia (Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Homel et al., 2010; Robinson & Lamb, 2012) and overseas (Cedefop, 2010; GHK, 2005; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). Australian research indicates that there is a 20 percentage point gap in retention rates to the end of Year 12 between young people from lower and higher socio-economic groups (Robinson & Lamb, 2012).

Parental separation will often have an impact on the family's socio-economic status, with possible implications for educational outcomes. Divorce in particular has a significant effect on finances, with women more likely than men to experience financial hardship in the years following divorce (de Vaus, Gray, Qu, & Stanton, 2007). Sole-parent families in general often struggle financially as a result of more restricted income-earning capacity and a reliance on government benefits whilst experiencing the normal expenses of a family with dependent children (de Vaus, 2004).

The impact of child support payments on the socio-economic status of sole parents in relation to educational outcomes for children, is an important consideration. There has been limited Australian

research on this specific topic. However, one study utilising data from the British Household Panel Survey indicated that receipt of child support payments by parents with primary care responsibilities has an independent, positive effect on preventing early school leaving (Walker & Zhu, 2008).

Residential mobility

Residential mobility can play an important role in educational outcomes for children and has been linked to early school leaving (Dale, 2010). Generally speaking, the literature indicates that moving residences for any family type may or may not be harmful depending on the set of circumstances surrounding the move. The effect on social capital in particular, defined as social support and networks available to children from parents, other family members, school and community services, can play a key role in whether child wellbeing is compromised or not (Austin, 2008).

Family transitions may lead to residential mobility, potentially in the form of post-separation relocation of the parent with whom the children mostly reside. Findings from US research indicate that when divorce and residential mobility are combined, there can be a strong impact on educational outcomes (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), especially where children lose contact with friends, adults, extended family members, teachers and sporting leaders (Mance & Yu, 2010). However, Austin (2008) drew attention to findings that indicate while the risk of harm in cases of post-separation relocation may be significant, the effect is not huge, and in fact may provide opportunities for a higher standard of living. Austin found that where changes have occurred, school behaviour problems have been indicated for younger children, and lower academic achievement and decreased wellbeing for teenage children.

Horsfall and Kaspiew (2010) examined social science evidence related to the impact of relocation on children, young people and adults and concluded that two contrasting positions existed in the literature—evidence exists that relocation does not cause harm and may be correlated with positive outcomes, compared to evidence indicating that relocation is associated with negative outcomes.

In summary, the literature indicates that residential mobility has a potentially significant effect on educational outcomes, especially in the context of the turmoil often associated with post-separation parenting arrangements. However, as Austin (2008) stated, “the normative outcome data from research studies should not be confused with the individual case in practice” (p. 147), as outcomes will vary considerably according to circumstance. The effects of mobility may be negative, negligible or in some cases positive, depending on individual circumstances and other competing factors (GHK, 2005).

Parenting practices

Parenting practices have been shown to impact on academic achievement and consequently early school leaving. Extensive research supports the notion that positive parent–child relationships and interactions lead to better developmental outcomes for children and young people (Moore, Guzman, Hair, Lippman, & Garrett, 2004). According to Dale (2010), research has consistently found that young people who leave school early are more often from families characterised by parenting styles that incorporate the following factors:

- lower levels of supervision;
- more likely to leave their offspring to make their own decisions;
- low aspirations for children’s schooling;
- less parental engagement with school;
- negative reactions to underachievement in school; and
- less verbal interaction between mothers and children.

From an adolescent perspective, this research resonates with findings from a longitudinal study in Finland (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2009), which indicated that parenting style at age 14 predicted school dropout even after controlling for gender, socio-economic status, temperament

and parental involvement. Adolescents who perceived their parents as *authoritative* at age 14 were more likely to have completed school at age 22 than those whose parents were perceived as *authoritarian* or *neglectful*.

Other risk factors for early school leaving

There are a number of other risk factors that are related to early school leaving, some of which are outlined below. Practitioners and policy-makers can be aware of these additional factors in order to assess the cumulative risk of early school leaving for teenage children.

Individual factors

Gender

Young men are at greater risk of early school leaving (Bushnik, Barr-Telford, & Bussière, 2004; Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Dale, 2010). Although the ratio of male and female early school leavers are reduced when vocational training and apprenticeships are taken into account in Australia, young men are still at higher risk of dropping out than young women. These phenomena are also found across countries in Europe (Cedefop, 2010; Rothon, Goodwin, & Stansfeld, 2012) and Canada (Bushnik et al., 2004). In a qualitative study of 193 Canadian youth who had left school early, Ferguson and colleagues (2005) determined that the key risk factors influencing young men to leave school early included a preference for working rather than sitting in school, substance use, and incarceration. The need to earn money to support themselves or family members was also mentioned, although no direct link with reduced income due to parental separation or divorce was made.

Aspirations and attitudes to education

The role of aspirations and attitudes to education appear to play a role in decisions to leave school early. In a study of multiple pathways taken by a large cohort of young people in the Netherlands, Traag and van der Velden (2011) found that young people who had plans and preferences for their future, high levels of motivation and more mature cognitive capacities were more likely to stay in school or follow recommended pathways than students who did not have plans, lacked motivation and struggled academically. Boys who left school early in the Netherlands study were found to have lower levels of motivation than girls.

In contrast, using retrospective data from the Canadian Youth in Transitions Survey (YITS), Bushnik et al. (2004) found that of those young people who eventually left school early, just over half had actually reported having *high* aspirations to complete high school, when they were interviewed in the years prior.

While the findings from the YITS study may appear counterintuitive to those in the Netherlands study, it is important to note that early school leavers in the YITS cohort reported a considerable number of other risk factors compared to those who completed their high school education, including coming from lower income households and living in non-intact families. This may have had some influence on their decision to leave, even though they previously held high aspirations. Menzies (2013) suggested that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may often have high aspirations for their education, but they may not know how to achieve them and may struggle to maintain them.

Special needs, disability and health

Young people with a disability were found to be almost three times more likely to be in the category of "not engaged in employment or continual training" (20%) compared to other groups (approx. 7%) in a study using LSAY data (Robinson & Lamb, 2012). Among the young people in this study who left school in Year 10 or below, 34% had a disability, health or mental health problem and many were highly likely to be experiencing, or have had experience of being homeless. Males from the LSAY study who left school

early, were twice as likely to cite long-term health problems or disabilities as the reason they were not employed or undertaking further training compared to females.

Similarly, across Europe, young people who leave school early are more likely to come from disadvantaged groups including young people with a disability, special needs or physical and mental health problems (Cedefop, 2011; GHK, 2005). It is clear that adolescents with special needs, whether it be learning or physical disability, or experiencing health problems, are vulnerable to dropping out of school prematurely.

Education and employment policies

From a broader perspective, specific education and employment policies are influential in decisions regarding early school leaving. Many education policies developed and implemented within larger political economies are designed as responsive measures to economic and labour market conditions. These policies often have an emphasis on providing young people with skills tailored to life-long contributions to the labour market, and therefore a reduction in welfare dependence (Robinson & Lamb, 2012). Labour market conditions clearly shape and influence decisions regarding leaving school early (Cedefop, 2010; Dale, 2010). While healthy economies can bode well for young people, high levels of employment opportunities have also historically seen greater numbers of youth leaving school early to pursue work in a buoyant labour market. Leaving school early due to easy access to employment may provide alternatives to education completion in the short term, but variable employment conditions may mean that early school leavers eventually need to compete for jobs with their more highly educated peers (Curtis & McMillan, 2008).

School-level policy and environment

Factors related to the school environment and operations can be instrumental in decisions to leave school. Ferguson et al. (2005), in their qualitative study of school leavers in Canada, indicated that early school leavers self-reported school risk factors as the most common reason for disengagement, including a negative and unrewarding school environment, lack of relevant curriculum and retentions/suspensions. Similarly, Taylor (2009) described the reasons why eight young people in the Life Chances Study¹ had left school between the ages of 14–16 years, including difficulties with or feelings of being overwhelmed by schoolwork, poor relationships with teachers, bullying, being asked to leave and self-identified “laziness”.

When there are incompatibilities between how a young person learns and the “school norms”, many young people can be left feeling disconnected from school, teachers and peers because of their poor academic performance (Dale, 2010; Curtis & McMillan, 2008). Young people are at greater risk of leaving school early when they perceive that schools and teachers are rejecting of them and that they don’t belong (Cedefop, 2010).

In terms of school-level policy, evidence across Europe, the UK, and Australia tells us that developing well-organised multi-track pathways in high schools is important for connecting education with work and/or further study. Failure to provide young people with alternatives to mainstream education places them at greater risk of disengagement and early school departure (Cedefop, 2010; Lamb, 2011; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). In Australia, as previously mentioned, VET in schools is clearly an important alternative pathway when considering that at least 15% of young people in 2009–10 participated in these programs. If VET in schools was unavailable, Robinson and Lamb (2012) suggested that many students might otherwise have chosen to leave school early, taking their chances in a competitive job market. The risks associated with such a move are evident when teenage unemployment rates are considered, with a full-time unemployment rate of 23% recorded for 15–19 year olds in Australia in November 2012 (DEEWR, 2013).

¹ The Life Chances Study is a longitudinal study, conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, which has followed 140 young people since their birth in Melbourne in 1990.

Parental separation

There is now an extensive evidence base that shows the impact of divorce on family, social and psychological outcomes for children, including educational outcomes (Rodgers, Gray, Davidson, & Butterworth, 2011). Circumstances that may arise for families due to separation and divorce include a decline in income, poor mental health and ineffective parenting provided by the resident parent, loss of contact with the non-resident parent (usually father), and conflict/uncooperative parenting between parents (Amato, 2010; Song et al., 2012). It is important to point out, however, that an under-studied but critical factor in determining the influence of these variables is the quality of family relationships pre-separation (Amato, 2010). Rodgers et al. (2011) pointed to a range of longitudinal studies that indicated that many educational and behavioural difficulties in children from both intact and divorced families were already in evidence prior to separation.

Another aspect of parental separation and child outcomes that has been widely considered is differential impacts for children based on their age at the time separation/divorce occurs. One of the most comprehensive analyses of research in this area was provided by Pryor and Rodgers (2001). In terms of younger children, they outlined a comprehensive review of 36 studies by eminent US researcher Paul Amato, which found little evidence to support the premise that parental separation has more detrimental outcomes for children when they are very young (1–6 years of age), versus separation when the children are older (Amato, cited in Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Other retrospective studies with older teens and young adults who have experienced parental separation/divorce at a very young age, have found that separation in the early childhood years is not particularly harmful in the long term (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). For example, analysis of data from the 1958 British Birth Cohort study found that the risks for young people, across a wide range of outcomes including education, were no different for those who experienced family separation in early childhood, compared to those who experienced family separation at an older stage of development (Kiernan, cited in Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). What does become apparent, however, is that children and adolescents of any age can experience adverse outcomes in the *immediate aftermath* of parental separation, although reactions and behaviours may differ according to age (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Parental separation in secondary school years

Any negative impact of parental separation or divorce in the adolescent years may be limited if there is a greater understanding of how significant such an event can be at this developmental stage, and how the impact may be softened. While there is a shift from dependence on parents to broader, reciprocal and supportive networks with family, peers, partners colleagues and others (Daniel, Wassell, & Gilligan, 1999), parents remain important in adolescence. A secure base, caring, connectedness, support and belonging, parental monitoring and boundary setting are all critical family factors that are linked to positive outcomes (Luthar, 2006).

The “secure base” role that parents play, in particular, provides fundamental emotional and psychological support via a warm and communicative child–parent relationship (Schofield & Beek, 2009). The processes involved in parental separation or divorce, which can exist well before and after the actual event itself, can become a significant threat to the predictability of vital family functions that promote positive adolescent development.

In turn, there is potential for the disruption and uncertainty surrounding parental separation/divorce to impact on academic achievement. Family conflict, a lack of family support or coping with difficult family circumstances in adolescence have all been linked to early school leaving (GHK, 2005). An analysis of the US National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), comprising of over 20,000 participants, found that the likelihood of a young person leaving school early increased when a parental separation/divorce specifically occurred in the high school years (Song et al., 2012). Parental separation/divorce predicted early school leaving over and above other family transitions such as a parent re-marrying or commencing a new co-habiting relationship.

Changes to financial circumstances may also prompt a decision to discontinue education. An association between parental divorce and leaving home before 17 years was found for adults aged 40–44 years in one Australian study, with those from divorced families twice as likely to leave home than those from intact families (Rodgers et al., 2011). The introduction of child support arrangements and family tax benefits, however, may contribute to less pressure for adolescents to leave school than in previous years.

Children from divorced families were also more likely to have their first child in their teenage years. As leaving home and early parenthood would likely involve the need for increased income, this may be another reason for early school leaving that is open to further exploration.

Qualitative evidence related to post-separation parenting practices and early school leaving

Insight into changes to parenting practices as a result of parental separation, and how this impacts on teenage children's education, are illuminated by qualitative research in the areas. Interviews conducted with over 600 Australian adolescents aged 12–18 years from separated families (Lodge & Alexander, 2010)² highlighted the importance of parents remaining sensitive and responsive to their children's needs, including providing flexible arrangements around adolescents' schedules. Many young people surveyed wanted to have the flexibility to adjust and move between their parents based on their own schedules. Young people who had equal care-time arrangements reported the greatest ease in seeing each parent in between things like doing schoolwork, playing sport, or seeing friends.

Maintaining a close relationship to one or both parents after separation is also important for adolescent overall wellbeing. Young people who did not feel close to either parent in the Lodge and Alexander (2010) study reported poorer academic achievement and psychological wellbeing, while adolescents who indicated they had a continuing close secure relationship with at least one or both parents were found to have greater self-rated school achievement, self-confidence and general happiness with life in the post-separation adjustment period. Interestingly, 92% of young people self-reported that they were doing better or equally well as their peers at school, and in the majority of cases (87%), parents agreed with their adolescent's rating.

Fortin, Hunt, and Scanlan (2012) undertook a telephone survey of almost 400 young adults in England who had experienced a parental relationship breakdown prior to 16 years old. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 50 young adults.

One respondent articulated the impact of living post-separation with her father, when her mother had previously taken on the role of organising and monitoring school attendance. The respondent described her father's reliance on her to independently organise her way to school, as he needed to leave home early for work. She described this transition as meaning that she had "no-one following me". When asked by the interviewer if she would have liked someone to "give you a bit of a kick and make you go", she replied:

Oh yeah I do. Not that I blame (my mother) but yeah it was her role and had been all those years that did all that stuff and suddenly she hadn't been there at a crucial time in my life. Very hormonal, just growing into your body and things that go on at school anyway with boys and all that side of thing my sister had to take up on ... I didn't have the structure at home to then take on with me through my education because my dad wasn't there, he was at work and would just leave me money out expecting me to go, which I very rarely did ... I definitely think that as she left she almost gave up all her mum roles and rights that she then never really took an interest in my education, never really gave me any advice or guidance either. She was quite self-absorbed for those few years. (aged 13 at time of separation, 27 at time of interview; Fortin et al., 2012, p. 52)

2 While just over 11% of the adolescents were no longer at school, the study does not indicate how many of these were early school leavers.

Another young woman stated that, in terms of her need to confide in someone about her parents' separation:

I wish someone had noticed ... I think there's a whole extended network of people out there that just didn't, teachers at school that saw my school work dropping off, and extended family who were very much there to support my dad, but yes, I just, I just wish someone, that there was someone that was keeping an eye on these things and seeing how things are working out (aged 15 at time of separation, 29 at time of interview; Fortin et al., 2012, p. 291).

These comments indicate the importance of the real and potential support that surrounds young people when they are experiencing family breakdown, and how that may possibly impact on day-to-day decision making related to school attendance.

Risk factors—summary

The above section summarises a range of risk factors and their potential influence on decisions to leave school early. Many of these risk factors are non-modifiable or out of the realm of influence for those working with families. Practitioners can, however, help families to identify ways in which family-related or family-influenced risk factors that are more open to moderation can be addressed. Protective factors against early school leaving exist that encompass parenting practices, positive school-home links, and a supportive community (Ferguson et al., 2005). While a full exploration of these factors is outside the scope of this paper, the section below explores one protective factor, parental involvement in education, that may be a pertinent focus for service delivery.

Parental involvement as a protective factor against early school leaving

Parental involvement³ has been associated with positive academic, social and behavioural outcomes for children and adolescents. A literature review conducted by Emerson et al. (2012) found that good quality and stimulating home environments, along with supportive parenting styles and parental self-efficacy,⁴ was related to good academic outcomes. Parental expectations and high levels of support appear to have more impact than socio-economic status, irrespective of a young person's actual levels of academic performance or levels of engagement with school (Dale, 2010; Homel et al., 2010).

Emerson et al. (2012) defined “parental engagement” as involving three broad aspects:

- partnerships between schools, families and communities;
- awareness raising of the importance of parental engagement in a child's education; and
- providing parents with the skills to become involved.

Both involvement in school- and home-based activities are discussed in the Emerson et al. (2012) report, for example, parental communication about the value of learning and expectations for education, a school climate that values parental input and a parenting style that is supportive of the child's learning. Levels of involvement may vary as a result of social class, poverty, health, parental role perception, and how confident parents feel in fulfilling this role (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003). This can be reflected in what Dale (2010) described as a “paradox of parental involvement”, and he cautioned against a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, understanding of phrases such as “helping with homework” and “talking to teachers” differ for parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Lareau, 1996, as cited in Dale, 2010). This indicates the importance of making certain that a common understanding of what “parental involvement” means exists between

3 Both parental engagement and parental involvement are terms that are used in the literature to describe the relationships between parents, schools and children. For the purposes of this paper, the two terms will be used interchangeably according to the term used within the research described. It is important to note, however, that the way in which parental involvement is measured in empirical research leads to some sensitivities in measured outcomes (Astone & McLanahan, 1994). For further information on the use of the two terms, see Emerson, Fear, Fox, and Sanders (2012).

4 Parental self-efficacy is defined as a belief that the personal actions of the parent help the child to learn and develop.

practitioners and clients, and the extent to which parents believe that responsibility for education lies with the school or within a school–home partnership.

The Emerson et al. (2012) review indicated that parental engagement in education has benefits for all age groups. While the *nature* of engagement may change over time, the continuation of the *level* of commitment from parents is important. Parental involvement may support learning in the secondary school years in a different manner to primary school, as adolescents' capacity for independent decision-making and expanding cognitive abilities are emerging. The content of out-of-school involvement may change to incorporate the more mature needs of the adolescent, such as the discussion of options for post-secondary education. As recent research on brain development in adolescence indicates, however, the areas of the brain related to behaviour and emotion regulation continue to develop through early adulthood, meaning that self-control and mature decision-making capacities are yet to be fully developed in the senior school years (Patton & Viner, 2007). As such, the involvement of parents in their adolescent children's education remains important.

Parental involvement in school post-separation

Jeynes (2002, 2005) specifically examined the relationship between parental involvement in educational activities and young people from intact and non-intact families. He determined that parental involvement is still beneficial post-separation and can help to offset any impacts of separation on educational outcomes in adolescence. This is an important message to give parents post-separation.

Parents who are negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements can be encouraged to talk to school personnel about what is happening at home and ask them to provide more support and more regular feedback than normal. However, it is recognised that the school itself plays an important role in the facilitation of parental involvement for both parents post-separation. Research indicates that many schools have difficulty in creating circumstances under which full involvement of both parents is feasible (Brown, Lundgren, Stevens, & Boadle, 2010). For example, ensuring both parents are provided with separate copies of students results and reports of their achievements, and are notified of opportunities for parent–teacher interviews. Effective two-way communication between separated/divorced parents and schools is fundamental to driving increased parental involvement in education and offsetting some of the risk factors related to early school leaving.

Not all aspects of parental involvement in education involves the school, however, and there is some suggestion that it is discussions between parents and young people about school and education that may be the most effective strategy for this age group. Longitudinal research in the US indicates that adolescents who engage in discussions about schoolwork, grades and other school-related topics with non-resident fathers are less likely to experience school failure than those who do not (Menning, 2006). Parents may be heartened to know that “dinnertime discussions” are a more effective parental involvement strategy in adolescence than helping with homework or doing voluntary work at the school (Jeynes, 2002, 2005), and doesn't depend on school policy.

Conclusion

Early school leaving can have significant long-term impacts on employment, social inclusion and financial outcomes for young people. This paper explored a number of family-related and other risk factors for early school leaving. It is likely that there is a complex relationship between the factors discussed in this paper, such as the impact of parental separation on income or parenting practices, and it is important to remember that outcomes may not always be negative for young people and their families.

In the turmoil that often surrounds parental separation, the needs of adolescents may be considered less of a focus than younger children due to their more advanced developmental stage. Yet research indicates that parental separation and post-separation outcomes for young people can have a lasting

impact at a crucial time of decision-making regarding the “third transition” of school to employment or further education. Strategies to encourage continued communication between parents and young people about education and employment choices are important in influencing outcomes.

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