

## 2. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AT HOME

By maintaining a home environment that encourages learning and focuses on school-related issues, parents can convey their support for education (Simon & Epstein, 2001). Parents communicate to their children that school is important by paying attention to school issues and asking questions and talking about their children's school day (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Conversations about daily classroom events or projects signal that education is valued and can be a strong predictor of student achievement (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Muller, 1993; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Encouraging students to do their homework and helping with homework can improve the quality of students' academic work and their attitudes toward school (Callahan et al., 1998; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Parents' involvement in their children's homework can take multiple forms, including creating a physical environment conducive to homework completion; establishing schedules for time use; providing oversight of the homework process; interacting with teachers; providing feedback on homework performance; participating in the homework process by helping, tutoring, or assisting their children; providing strategies that help with understanding homework, such as modeling and discussing problem-solving strategies; and focusing on children's self-management skills or emotional responses to homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

This chapter describes families' involvement in home-based activities that support the education of secondary-school-age students with disabilities, specifically focusing on two types of involvement at home<sup>1</sup>:

- ◆ Talking with students about school
- ◆ Helping with homework.

The chapter begins with a description of the two types of at-home involvement. It continues with a comparison of home-based education support for students with disabilities with that for students in the general population. Finally, disability category differences in home-based family involvement are presented.

### **Involvement at Home**

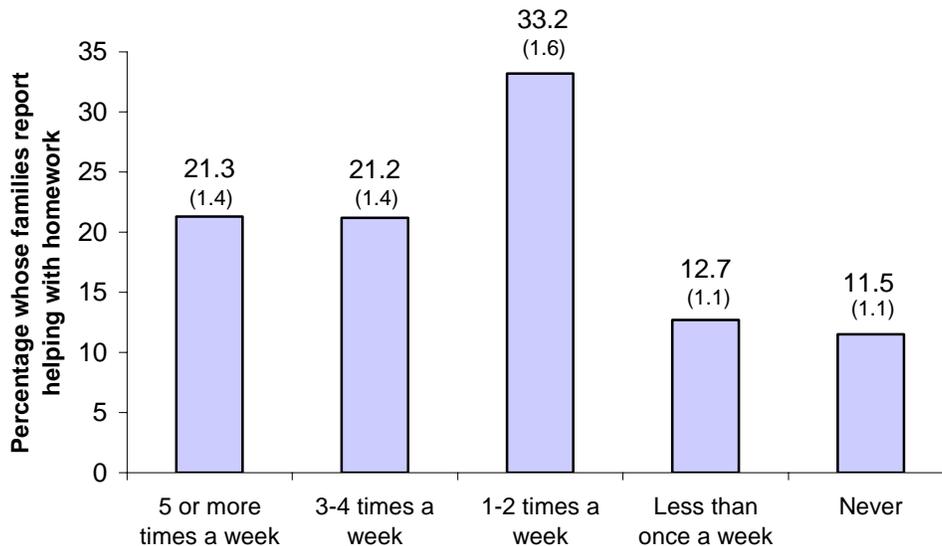
The majority of families of secondary-school-age students with disabilities report providing support at home for schoolwork (Exhibit 2-1).

- ❖ Three-quarters of students have parents who are involved at least once a week in helping with homework.
- ❖ Twenty-one percent help with homework three to four times a week.
- ❖ One in five report supervising and assisting with homework as often as five or more times a week.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter describes the experiences of youth with disabilities who were ages 13 through 17 at the time of the parent interview. Findings are weighted estimates of the national population of students receiving special education in the NLTS2 age group, as well as those in each disability category individually. Only differences among groups that reach a level of statistical significance of at least .05 are mentioned in the text.

**Exhibit 2-1  
HELPING WITH HOMEWORK**



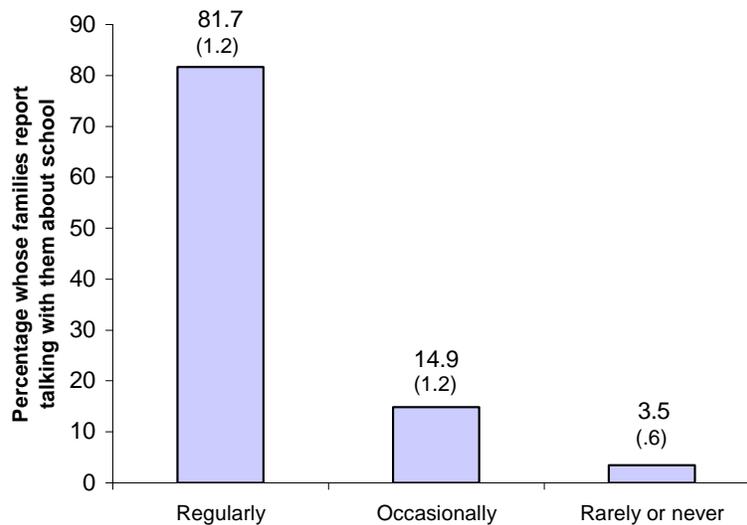
Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Although students often benefit from parents’ homework involvement, such as having higher rates of homework completion and higher grades (Epstein, 2001; Levine, 2001; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996), this type of involvement may have less desirable effects as well. Some researchers suggest that interactions about homework can put tension on the parent-child relationship (Baumgartner, Bryan, Donahue, & Nelson, 1993; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Helping secondary school students with homework can be particularly difficult when students take complex courses, such as geometry or chemistry. These issues point to the importance of parents’ receiving ongoing information and guidance on how best to assist their children.

Parents also can communicate their interest in and support for education by asking questions and having conversations about their children’s school day. Most students with disabilities live in households where families talk with them about their school experiences (Exhibit 2-2). According to parents:

- ❖ More than 80% of middle and high school students with disabilities regularly have conversations with their parents about their school experiences.
- ❖ Fewer than 4% rarely or never talk about school with adults at home.

## Exhibit 2-2 TALKING ABOUT SCHOOL



Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

### ***Scale of Family Support at Home***

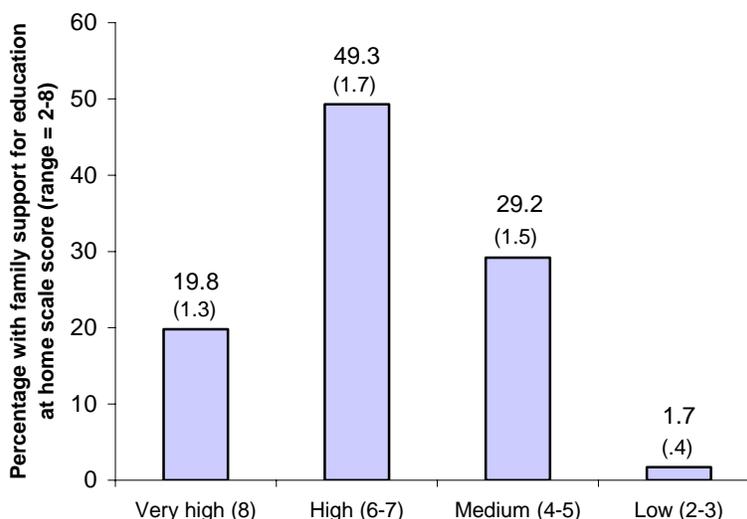
A scale was created to examine the extent to which parents exhibit two educational support behaviors at home: talking about school and helping with homework (Exhibit 2-3). Summing values from 1 to 4 for the frequency of each of these behaviors<sup>2</sup> results in a scale that ranges from 2 (the least involved in both activities) to 8 (the most involved in both).

- ❖ Almost one in five students have families who provide very high support (i.e. a score of 8). These students have families in which adults speak with them about school regularly and help them with homework five or more times a week.
- ❖ An additional 49% of families receive high scores (i.e. a score of 6 or 7), resulting in more than two-thirds (69%) having high or very high scores.
- ❖ Fewer than 2% of families report low levels of support (i.e. a score of 2 or 3).
- ❖ The mean scale score is 6.2, with families on average being highly supportive of education in the home.

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<sup>2</sup> The homework variable was collapsed to a 4-point scale by summing the responses of “less than once a week” with responses for “never” for use in this combined-scale score.

**Exhibit 2-3  
FAMILY SUPPORT AT HOME**



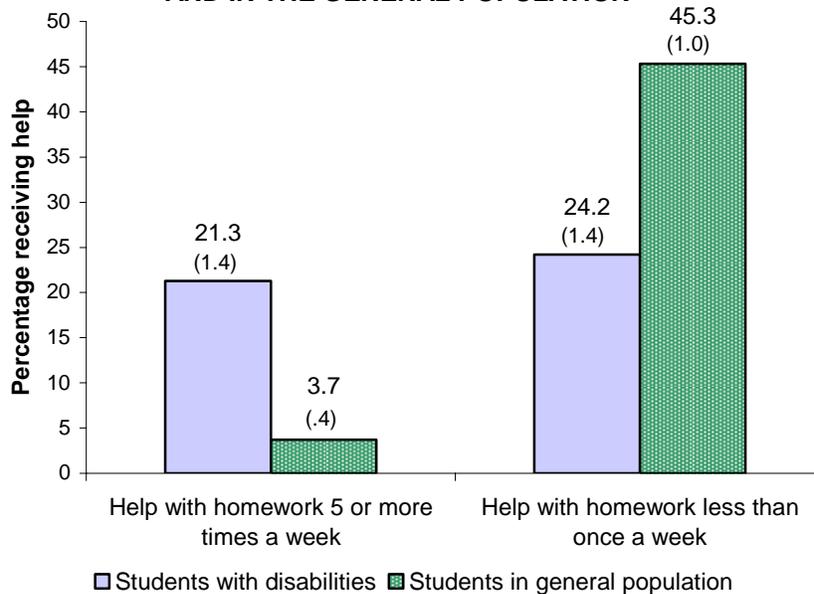
Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

***Comparison with Families in the General Population***

Secondary-school-age youth with disabilities are more likely to receive homework assistance than are their peers in the general population (Exhibit 2-4). Three-quarters of those with disabilities receive help with homework at least once a week, compared with slightly more than half (55%) of those in the general population ( $p < .001$ ).

- ❖ Students with disabilities are five times as likely as their peers to receive homework assistance frequently. Only 4% of secondary school students in the general population receive help with homework five or more times a week, compared with 21% of youth with disabilities who receive homework assistance that often ( $p < .001$ ).
- ❖ At the other end of the homework-help spectrum—students who rarely receive help—students in the general population are almost twice as likely as those with disabilities to receive homework assistance never or rarely. Almost half (45%) of students in the general population receive homework help less than once a week; in contrast, only 24% of those with disabilities receive such infrequent assistance ( $p < .001$ ).

**Exhibit 2-4**  
**FREQUENCY OF RECEIVING HELP WITH HOMEWORK**  
**FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**  
**AND IN THE GENERAL POPULATION**



Sources: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews and U.S. Department of Education, NCES, National Household Education Survey, 1996 parent survey (responses calculated for youth ages 13-17). Standard errors are in parentheses.

Solely focusing on the demographics of the two groups might suggest that parents of students in the general population would be more involved than parents of students with disabilities. Two-parent families, higher household incomes, and higher parent education levels have long been associated with higher levels of parent involvement (Coleman, 1987; Gavidia-Payne & Stoneman, 1997; Lareau, 1987; Nord & West, 2001; Peng & Lee, 1992). However, families of students with disabilities are less likely to have any of these characteristics; instead, these parents are more likely to be divorced or separated (resulting in more single-parent families), to have lower incomes, and to have not attended postsecondary school (Wagner, Marder, Levine, et al., 2003; Wagner, Marder, Blackorby, & Cardoso, 2002). Yet parents of students with disabilities are more involved in their children’s education than are those in the general population. Clearly, demographics do not explain the differences in levels of involvement.

There are multiple reasons beyond demographics why parents decide to become involved in their children’s education. Research on parent involvement has suggested that parents’ decisions to become involved is a function of parents’ fundamental perceptions of their role in their children’s lives, how effective they feel in helping their children, and the “invitations, demands, and opportunities for parental involvement presented by both the child and the child’s school” (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 9).

## Disability Differences in Home-Based Family Involvement

Family involvement in the education-related activities at home measured by NLTS2 varies across disability categories, with more variation in some forms of family involvement than others (Exhibit 2-5). Talking with children about school is more uniformly reported across disability categories than helping with homework. For example, there is a 13-percentage-point difference between families with the lowest and highest rates of regularly talking about school (77% of families of students with deaf-blindness,  $p < .05$  vs. 90% of families of students with other health impairments), compared with an 18-percentage-point spread in the rates of families frequently assisting with homework (18% for families of students with emotional disturbances vs. 36% for families of students with multiple disabilities,  $p < .001$ ).

**Exhibit 2-5**  
**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AT HOME, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY**

	Learning Disability	Speech/Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Autism	Traumatic Brain Injury	Multiple Disabilities	Deaf-Blindness
Percentage whose families report helping with homework 5 or more times a week	19.8 (2.0)	22.6 (2.1)	28.6 (2.5)	18.2 (2.2)	21.0 (2.6)	26.8 (3.6)	31.3 (2.7)	21.6 (2.0)	35.2 (3.0)	20.6 (3.8)	35.9 (3.2)	26.3 (5.6)
Percentage whose families report talking with them regularly about school	80.7 (1.9)	84.8 (1.8)	79.3 (2.1)	84.9 (1.9)	85.6 (2.2)	87.1 (2.7)	86.1 (1.9)	89.7 (1.5)	78.7 (2.2)	83.5 (3.4)	79.8 (2.2)	77.0 (5.0)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.

Standard errors are in parentheses.

- ❖ Families of youth with emotional disturbances are the least likely to help with homework frequently (18%) and the most likely to provide homework assistance less than once a week (36%).
- ❖ Students with multiple disabilities, autism, or orthopedic impairments receive the most frequent homework assistance, with 31% to 36% helped five or more times a week, compared with 20% of those with learning disabilities ( $p < .001$  for all comparisons).
- ❖ Families of those with other health (90%), visual (87%), or hearing impairments (86%) are among the most likely to report regularly talking with their children about school.
- ❖ Families of those with deaf-blindness (77%), autism (79%), or mental retardation (79%) are among the least likely to report regularly talking with their children about school.

## Summary

Families of most students with disabilities are very involved in supporting their children's educational development at home.

- ◆ Most families report regularly talking with their children about school and helping with homework at least once a week.
- ◆ One in five provide homework assistance as often as five or more times per week.
- ◆ Students with disabilities are more likely to receive help with homework than are their peers in the general population.
- ◆ The difference in homework support is especially apparent for those who receive frequent help; students with disabilities are five times as likely as their peers in the general population to receive homework assistance frequently.
- ◆ Family support for education at home varies across disability categories.
- ◆ Youth with emotional disturbances are among the least likely to receive help with homework.
- ◆ Students with multiple disabilities, autism, or orthopedic impairments receive the most frequent homework assistance.

This chapter has examined family involvement at home, focusing on overall experiences and differences across disability categories. Chapter 3 moves the focus from home- to school-based involvement.