

*Moon?* Was the move to the suburbs worthwhile? Do the kids with PTA parents do better than the kids whose parents have never heard of the PTA?

The wide-ranging ECLS data offer a number of compelling correlations between a child's personal circumstances and his school performance. For instance, once all other factors are controlled for, it is clear that students from rural areas tend to do worse than average. Suburban children, meanwhile, are in the middle of the curve, while urban children tend to score higher than average. (It may be that cities attract a more educated workforce and, therefore, parents with smarter children.) On average, girls test higher than boys, and Asians test higher than whites—although blacks, as we have already established, test similarly to whites from comparable backgrounds and in comparable schools.

Knowing what you now know about regression analysis, conventional wisdom, and the art of parenting, consider the following list of sixteen factors. According to the ECLS data, eight of the factors show a strong correlation—positive or negative—with test scores. The other eight don't seem to matter. Feel free to guess which are which. Keep in mind that these results reflect only a child's early test scores, a useful but fairly narrow measurement; poor testing in early childhood isn't necessarily a great harbinger of future earnings, creativity, or happiness.

*The child has highly educated parents.*

*The child's family is intact.*

*The child's parents have high socioeconomic status.*

*The child's parents recently moved into a better neighborhood.*

*The child's mother was thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth.*

*The child's mother didn't work between birth and kindergarten.*

*The child had low birthweight.*

*The child attended Head Start.*

*The child's parents speak English in the home.*

*The child's parents regularly take him to museums.*

*The child is adopted.*

*The child is regularly spanked.*

*The child's parents are involved in the PTA.*

*The child frequently watches television.*

*The child has many books in his home.*

*The child's parents read to him nearly every day.*

Here now are the eight factors that are strongly correlated with test scores:

*The child has highly educated parents.*

*The child's parents have high socioeconomic status.*

*The child's mother was thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth.*

*The child had low birthweight.*

*The child's parents speak English in the home.*

*The child is adopted.*

*The child's parents are involved in the PTA.*

*The child has many books in his home.*

And the eight that aren't:

*The child's family is intact.*

*The child's parents recently moved into a better neighborhood.*

*The child's mother didn't work between birth and kindergarten.*

FREAKONOMICS

WHAT MAKES A PERFECT PARENT?

*The child attended Head Start.*

*The child's parents regularly take him to museums.*

*The child is regularly spanked.*

*The child frequently watches television.*

*The child's parents read to him nearly every day.*

Now, two by two:

# 1

**MATTERS:** *The child has highly educated parents.*

**DOESN'T:** *The child's family is intact.*

A child whose parents are highly educated typically does well in school; not much surprise there. A family with a lot of schooling tends to value schooling. Perhaps more important, parents with higher IQs tend to get more education, and IQ is strongly hereditary. But whether a child's family is intact doesn't seem to matter. Just as the earlier-cited studies show that family structure has little impact on a child's personality, it does not seem to affect his academic abilities either, at least in the early years. This is not to say that families ought to go around splitting up willy-nilly. It should, however, offer encouragement to the roughly twenty million American schoolchildren being raised by a single parent.

# 2

**MATTERS:** *The child's parents have high socioeconomic status.*

**DOESN'T:** *The child's parents recently moved into a better neighborhood.*

A high socioeconomic status is strongly correlated to higher test scores, which seems sensible. Socioeconomic status is a strong

indicator of success in general—it suggests a higher IQ and more education—and successful parents are more likely to have successful children. But moving to a better neighborhood doesn't improve a child's chances in school. It may be that moving itself is a disruptive force; more likely, it's because a nicer house doesn't improve math or reading scores any more than nicer sneakers make you jump higher.

# 3

**MATTERS:** *The child's mother was thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth.*

**DOESN'T:** *The child's mother didn't work between birth and kindergarten.*

A woman who doesn't have her first child until she is at least thirty is likely to see that child do well in school. This mother tends to be a woman who wanted to get some advanced education or develop traction in her career. She is also likely to *want* a child more than a teenage mother wants a child. This doesn't mean that an older first-time mother is necessarily a better mother, but she has put herself—and her children—in a more advantageous position. (It is worth noting that this advantage is nonexistent for a teenage mother who waits until she is thirty to have her *second* child. The ECLS data show that her second child will perform no better than her first.) At the same time, a mother who stays home from work until her child goes to kindergarten does not seem to provide any advantage. Obsessive parents might find this lack of correlation bothersome—what was the point of all those Mommy and Me classes?—but that is what the data tell us.

#4

**MATTERS:** *The child had low birthweight.***DOESN'T:** *The child attended Head Start.*

A child who had a low birthweight tends to do poorly in school. It may be that being born prematurely is simply hurtful to a child's overall well-being. It may also be that low birthweight is a strong forecaster of poor parenting, since a mother who smokes or drinks or otherwise mistreats her baby in utero isn't likely to turn things around just because the baby is born. A low-birthweight child, in turn, is more likely to be a poor child—and, therefore, more likely to attend Head Start, the federal preschool program. But according to the ECLS data, Head Start does nothing for a child's future test scores. Despite a deep reservoir of appreciation for Head Start (one of this book's authors was a charter student), we must acknowledge that it has repeatedly been proven ineffectual in the long term. Here's a likely reason: instead of spending the day with his own undereducated, overworked mother, the typical Head Start child spends the day with someone else's undereducated, overworked mother. (And a whole roomful of similarly needy children.) As it happens, fewer than 30 percent of Head Start teachers have even a bachelor's degree. And the job pays so poorly—about \$21,000 for a Head Start teacher versus \$40,000 for the average public-school kindergarten teacher—that it is unlikely to attract better teachers any time soon.

#5

**MATTERS:** *The child's parents speak English in the home.***DOESN'T:** *The child's parents regularly take him to museums.*

A child with English-speaking parents does better in school than one whose parents don't speak English. Again, not much

of a surprise. This correlation is further supported by the performance of Hispanic students in the ECLS study. As a group, Hispanic students test poorly; they are also disproportionately likely to have non-English-speaking parents. (They do, however, tend to catch up with their peers in later grades.) So how about the opposite case: what if a mother and father are not only proficient in English but spend their weekends broadening their child's cultural horizons by taking him to museums? Sorry. Culture cramming may be a foundational belief of obsessive parenting, but the ECLS data show no correlation between museum visits and test scores.

**MATTERS:** *The child is adopted.***DOESN'T:** *The child is regularly spanked.*

There is a strong correlation—a negative one—between adoption and school test scores. Why? Studies have shown that a child's academic abilities are far more influenced by the IQs of his biological parents than the IQs of his adoptive parents, and mothers who offer up their children for adoption tend to have significantly lower IQs than the people who are doing the adopting. There is another explanation for low-achieving adoptees which, though it may seem distasteful, jibes with the basic economic theory of self-interest: a woman who knows she will offer her baby for adoption may not take the same prenatal care as a woman who is keeping her baby. (Consider—at the risk of furthering the distasteful thinking—how you treat a car you own versus a car you are renting for the weekend.)

But if an adopted child is prone to lower test scores, a spanked child is not. This may seem surprising—not because spanking it-

#6

self is necessarily detrimental but because, conventionally spanking, spanking is considered an unenlightened practice. We might therefore assume that parents who spank are unenlightened in other ways. Perhaps that isn't the case at all. Or perhaps there is a different spanking story to be told. Remember, the ECLS survey included direct interviews with the children's parents. So a parent would have to sit knee to knee with a government researcher and admit to spanking his child. This would suggest that a parent who does so is either unenlightened or—more interestingly—congenitally honest. It may be that honesty is more important to good parenting than spanking is to bad parenting.

**MATTERS:** *The child's parents are involved in the PTA.*  
**DOESN'T:** *The child frequently watches television.*

A child whose parents are involved in the PTA tends to do well in school—which probably indicates that parents with a strong relationship to education get involved in the PTA, not that their PTA involvement somehow makes their children smarter. The ECLS data show no correlation, meanwhile, between a child's test scores and the amount of television he watches. Despite the conventional wisdom, watching television apparently does not turn a child's brain to mush. (In Finland, whose education system has been ranked the world's best, most children do not begin school until age seven but have often learned to read on their own by watching American television with Finnish subtitles.) Nor, however, does using a computer at home turn a child into Einstein: the ECLS data show no correlation between computer use and school test scores.

#7

Now for the final pair of factors:

**MATTERS:** *The child has many books in his home.*  
**DOESN'T:** *The child's parents read to him nearly every day.*

As noted earlier, a child with many books in his home has indeed been found to do well on school tests. But regularly reading to a child *doesn't* affect early childhood test scores.

This would seem to present a riddle. It bounces us back to our original question: just how much, and in what ways, do parents really matter?

Let's start with the positive correlation: books in the home equal higher test scores. Most people would look at this correlation and infer an obvious cause-and-effect relationship. To wit: a little boy named Isaiah has a lot of books at home; Isaiah does beautifully on his reading test at school; this must be because his mother or father regularly reads to him. But Isaiah's friend Emily, who also has a lot of books in her home, practically never touches them. She would rather dress up her Bratz or watch cartoons. And Emily tests just as well as Isaiah. Meanwhile, Isaiah and Emily's friend Ricky doesn't have *any* books at home. But Ricky goes to the library every day with his mother. And yet he does *worse* on his school tests than either Emily or Isaiah.

What are we to make of this? If reading books doesn't have an impact on early childhood test scores, could it be that the books' mere physical presence in the house makes the children smarter? Do books perform some kind of magical osmosis on a child's brain? If so, one might be tempted to simply deliver a truckload of books to every home that contains a preschooler.

That, in fact, is what the governor of Illinois tried to do. In

#8

early 2004, Governor Rod Blagojevich announced a plan to mail one book a month to every child in Illinois from the time they were born until they entered kindergarten. The plan would cost \$26 million a year. But, Blagojevich argued, this was a vital intervention in a state where 40 percent of third graders read below their grade level. "When you own [books] and they're yours," he said, "and they just come as part of your life, all of that will contribute to a sense . . . that books should be part of your life."

So all children born in Illinois would end up with a sixty-volume library by the time they entered school. Does this mean they would all perform better on their reading tests?

Probably not. (Although we may never know for sure: in the end, the Illinois legislature rejected the book plan.) After all, the ECLS data don't say that books in the house *cause* high test scores; it says only that the two are correlated.

How should this correlation be interpreted? Here's a likely theory: most parents who buy a lot of children's books tend to be smart and well educated to begin with. (And they pass on their smarts and work ethic to their kids.) Or perhaps they care a great deal about education, and about their children in general. (Which means they create an environment that encourages and rewards learning.) Such parents may believe—as fervently as the governor of Illinois believed—that every child's book is a talisman that leads to unfettered intelligence. But they are probably wrong. A book is in fact less a cause of intelligence than an *indicator*.

So what does all this have to say about the importance of parents in general? Consider again the eight ECLS factors that are correlated with school test scores:

*The child has highly educated parents.*

*The child's parents have high socioeconomic status.*

*The child's mother was thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth.*

*The child had low birthweight.*

*The child's parents speak English in the home.*

*The child is adopted.*

*The child's parents are involved in the PTA.*

*The child has many books in his home.*

And the eight factors that are not:

*The child's family is intact.*

*The child's parents recently moved into a better neighborhood.*

*The child's mother didn't work between birth and kindergarten.*

*The child attended Head Start.*

*The child's parents regularly take him to museums.*

*The child is regularly spanked.*

*The child frequently watches television.*

*The child's parents read to him nearly every day.*

To overgeneralize a bit, the first list describes things that parents *are*; the second list describes things that parents *do*. Parents who are well educated, successful, and healthy tend to have children who test well in school; but it doesn't seem to matter whether a child is trotted off to museums or spanked or sent to Head Start or frequently read to or plopped in front of the television.

For parents—and parenting experts—who are obsessed with

child-rearing technique, this may be sobering news. The reality is that technique looks to be highly overrated.

But this is not to say that parents don't matter. Plainly they matter a great deal. Here is the conundrum: by the time most people pick up a parenting book, it is far too late. Most of the things that matter were decided long ago—who you are, whom you married, what kind of life you lead. If you are smart, hardworking, well educated, well paid, and married to someone equally fortunate, then your children are more likely to succeed. (Nor does it hurt, in all likelihood, to be honest, thoughtful, loving, and curious about the world.) But it isn't so much a matter of what you *do* as a parent; it's who you are. In this regard, an overbearing parent is a lot like a political candidate who believes that money wins elections—whereas in truth, all the money in the world can't get a candidate elected if the voters don't like him to start with.

In a paper titled "The Nature and Nurture of Economic Outcomes," the economist Bruce Sacerdote addressed the nature-nurture debate by taking a long-term quantitative look at the effects of parenting. He used three adoption studies, two American and one British, each of them containing in-depth data about the adopted children, their adoptive parents, and their biological parents. Sacerdote found that parents who adopt children are typically smarter, better educated, and more highly paid than the baby's biological parents. But the adoptive parents' advantages had little bearing on the child's school performance. As also seen in the ECLS data, adopted children test relatively poorly in school; any influence the adoptive parents might exert is seemingly outweighed by the force of genetics. But, Sacerdote found, the parents were not powerless forever. By the time the adopted children became adults, they had veered sharply from the des-

tiny that IQ alone might have predicted. Compared to similar children who were *not* put up for adoption, the adoptees were far more likely to attend college, to have a well-paid job, and to wait until they were out of their teens before getting married. It was the influence of the adoptive parents, Sacerdote concluded, that made the difference.