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Summary: Assessing the Impact of Parent Involvement Programs

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Drawing examples from research at the Harvard Family Research Project on the connections between family involvement and child literacy, Dearing explores four findings from empirical research that have implications for evaluating family involvement programs and interventions. He argues that for evaluators to accurately measure program effects, they need to design studies that can identify

1. Non-program factors that might influence parents' involvement in children education
2. Within-family changes in involvement over time
3. Indirect ways in which parents' involvement can affect student achievement
4. Differences across families in the meaningfulness and impact of family involvement

Dearing demonstrates these four processes with findings from the School Transition Study (STS), a longitudinal study of 390 low-income children and families followed from kindergarten through fifth grade. Dearing uses school context in the STS as an example of non-program factors that can affect family involvement. To help demonstrate the importance of modeling within-family variations in involvement, he uses involvement patterns of teenage mothers. At kindergarten, teenage mothers in the STS were far less involved in their children's education than older mothers. By fifth grade, however, younger mothers were as involved as older mothers. As a demonstration of the importance of examining indirect effects, Dearing provides evidence that the relation between mothers' involvement in literacy and children's literacy achievement in the STS was mediated through children's feelings about literacy. Last, as a demonstration of variations across families in the meaningfulness of involvement, Dearing reports findings from the STS showing more positive associations between involvement and children's literacy for less educated mothers than for more educated mothers.