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Parents' Education Before Migrating Tied to Children's Achievement

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Academic Achievement of Legal Immigrants' Children: The Roles of Parents' Pre- and Postmigration Characteristics in Origin-Group Differences

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Immigrant parents' education before migrating is more strongly tied to their children's achievement in the United States than any other social, economic, or linguistic parental attribute, either before or after migration. That's the conclusion of a new study in a special section of the September/October 2012 issue of *Child Development* on the children of immigrants.

The study was carried out by researchers at the Pennsylvania State University.

Immigrants come to the United States with different socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of proficiency in English. Past research hasn't fully considered how these factors affect children's academic achievement. For this study, researchers used parent data from the New Immigrant Survey, a longitudinal and nationally representative study of legal immigrants. To measure academic achievement, the researchers used scores from Woodcock Johnson III tests that were given as part of the New Immigrant Survey to more than 2,100 children ages 6 to 12 whose parents were included in the study. Among their findings:

- Premigration characteristics (such as education, work status, and occupation) of parents account fully for the test score disadvantage of Mexican-origin children of legal immigrants compared to non-Latino children of legal immigrants.
- The level of cognitive stimulation (how often a parent reads to a child, for example) in immigrant homes is significantly related to parents' premigration and English skills, over and above their postmigration socioeconomic status.
- Families' socioeconomic status before migrating contributes significantly to their socioeconomic status after migrating, but in different ways for different groups of immigrants. Specifically, immigrant parents who previously held higher-status occupations tend to find lower-status jobs after migration, while those who were previously unemployed are able to find jobs after migration.

“Our research reveals important aspects of continuity between immigrants’ pre- and postmigration resources,” suggests Suet-ling Pong, professor of education and sociology at the Pennsylvania State University and the study’s lead author. “Even after the transformative event of immigration, family social privilege or disadvantage often persists and is transmitted to subsequent generations.”

According to Pong, the results raise the possibility that adult literacy programs to increase education levels of immigrant parents could have benefits in both parents’ and children’s generations. Such approaches may be particularly important to consider for immigrant families from Mexico, she said.

The study was supported by the Population Research Institute at the Pennsylvania State University under an infrastructure grant from the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 83, Issue 5, Academic Achievement of Legal Immigrants’ Children: The Roles of Parents’ Pre- and Postmigration Characteristics in Origin-Group Differences by Pong, S-l (The Pennsylvania State University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong), and Landale, NS (The Pennsylvania State University). Copyright 2012 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.