

Aspiration interventions



Very low or no impact for moderate cost, based on very limited evidence.

By aspirations we mean the things children and young people hope to achieve for themselves in the future. To meet their aspirations about careers, university, and further education, pupils often require good educational outcomes. Raising aspirations is therefore often believed to incentivise improved attainment.

Aspiration interventions tend to fall into three broad categories:

1. interventions that focus on parents and families;
2. interventions that focus on teaching practice; and
3. out-of-school interventions or extra-curricular activities, sometimes involving peers or mentors.

The approaches used in these interventions are diverse. Some aim to change aspirations directly by exposing children to new opportunities and others aim to raise aspirations by developing general self-esteem, motivation, or self-efficacy. For interventions that focus on self-efficacy and motivation specifically in a learning context please see [Metacognition and self-regulation](#).

How effective is it?

The relationship between aspirations and attainment is complex but, on average, interventions which aim to raise aspirations appear to have little or no positive impact on educational attainment. This may seem counterintuitive but there are three main reasons why this might be the case.

First, evidence suggests that most young people already have high aspirations, suggesting that much underachievement results not from low aspiration but from a gap between aspirations and the knowledge, skills, and characteristics required to achieve them. Second, where pupils do have lower aspirations, it is not clear that any targeted interventions have consistently succeeded in raising their aspirations. Third, where aspirations begin low and are successfully raised by an intervention, it is not clear that an improvement in learning necessarily follows. As a result it may be more helpful to focus directly on raising attainment. In aspiration programmes which do raise attainment, additional academic support is generally present.

How secure is the evidence?

The evidence base on aspiration interventions is very limited. More rigorous studies are required, particularly focusing on pupil-level rather than school-level interventions. There are no meta-analyses of interventions to raise aspirations that report impact on attainment or learning. There are two relevant systematic reviews. These indicate that the relationship between aspirations and attainment is complex and that the evidence for a clear causal connection between learning, changing aspirations, and attitudes to school is weak.

This lack of strong evidence does not mean that impact is not achievable, but schools considering aspiration interventions cannot assume that raising aspirations will be straightforward or will necessarily increase attainment.

The majority of studies come from the USA. There has been little robust research on the impact of aspiration interventions in English schools.

What are the costs?

Costs vary widely and are hard to estimate precisely, but overall they are estimated as moderate. After school programmes typically cost about £5 to £10 per session, so a weekly programme lasting 20 weeks might cost up to £200 per pupil. [Parental engagement](#) programmes typically cost between about £200 per child per year when the school covers the staffing costs, and about £850 per child per year for family support involving a full-time support worker. Mentoring approaches aiming to raise aspirations in the USA have been estimated at \$900 per student per year or about £630.

Aspiration interventions: What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. The relationship between aspirations and attainment is not straightforward. In general, approaches to raising aspirations have not translated into increased learning.
2. Most young people have high aspirations for themselves. Ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to progress towards their aspirations is likely to be more effective than intervening to change the aspirations themselves.
3. The attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that surround aspirations in disadvantaged communities are diverse, so avoid generalisations.
4. Effective approaches almost always have a significant academic component, suggesting that raising aspirations in isolation will not be effective.
5. Have you considered how you will monitor the impact on attainment of any interventions or approaches?

Technical Appendix

Definition

By aspirations we mean the things children and young people hope to achieve for themselves in the future. To meet their aspirations about careers, university, and further education, pupils often require good educational outcomes. Raising aspirations is therefore often believed to incentivise improved attainment.

Key indicators of a young person's aspirations might be, for example, their reported desire to continue with education post-16 or pursue a particular job or career.

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The approaches used in these interventions are diverse. Some aim to change aspirations directly by exposing children to new opportunities and others aim to raise aspirations by developing general self-esteem, motivation or self-efficacy. For interventions which focus on self-efficacy and motivation specifically in a learning context please see [Metacognition and self-regulation](#).

An important assumption underpinning these approaches is that low aspiration is a cause of low attainment. However there is little robust evidence of the direction of any causal relationship. It may be that poor attainment reduces aspirations, making it more important to improve attainment so as to raise aspirations than to tackle aspirations directly, or independently of capability.

Search terms: attitudes/expectation; aspiration; behaviour; intention; motivation; self-efficacy

Evidence Rating

Overall, the evidence relating to raising aspirations as a means to improve attainment is very limited. There are no meta-analyses of interventions to raise aspirations that report impact on attainment or learning. This lack of evidence does not mean that impact is not achievable, but should make schools cautious as to how they invest time or resources in this area.

There are two relevant systematic reviews, one of which includes some quantitative data. These indicate that the relationship between aspirations and attainment is complex and that the evidence for a clear causal connection between learning, changing aspirations, and attitudes to school is weak.

Although one study reports a range of effects on attainment (0.17 to 0.45 for parental involvement; 0.09 to 0.22 for mentoring and from 0.03 to 0.09 for extra-curricular activities) these effects are associated with other influences on learning, such as parental involvement in reading or academic mentoring, and so are not considered appropriate for use in a meta-analysis. The effect size presented is therefore indicative.

Additional Cost Information

Costs vary widely and are hard to estimate precisely, but overall they are estimated as moderate. After school programmes typically cost about £5 to £10 per session, so a weekly programme lasting 20 weeks might cost up to £200 per pupil. [Parental engagement](#) programmes typically cost between about £200 per child per year when the school covers the staffing costs, and about £850 per child per year for family support involving a full-time support worker. [Mentoring approaches](#) aiming to raise aspirations in the USA have been estimated at \$900 per student per year or about £630.

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Summary of effects

Indicative effect size	0.00
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The right hand column provides detail on the specific outcome measures or, if in brackets, details of the intervention or control group.

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