Building Blocks for Father Involvement

Building Block 2: First Thoughts on Getting Fathers Involved in Head Start

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For too long, teaching children to read has been seen as women's work. New research recognizes this limits child development. Fathers play a critical role in learning, too.

—Robert W. Ortiz, Ph.D., Cal. State, Fullerton

Overview

For too long, early childhood education has been seen as women's work. Through research, which demonstrates showing how kids benefit from having their dads involved in their lives, it is clear that children are short-changed when men are missing from the parenting partnership.

Building Block 1 provided an overview of research findings, which highlight how fathers contribute in unique ways to healthy child development. *Block 2* explores some of the important foundational questions that need to be asked and steps that need to be taken in planning for the development of an effective father involvement program.

Photo by A. Vanden Heuvel, Osh Kosh HS

IMPORTANCE OF MALE INFLUENCE

Fact: In some early grades, there is a 50:1 ratio of females to males in the school faculty. Scholars suspect this could result in young boys seeing school as a woman's world. In countries such as Japan and Germany where the majority of teachers are male, boys typically do better in reading scores and are less likely to suffer from severe reading problems. Boys need to see that reading and learning are not just women's work.

—Henry B. Biller

Why Do We Overlook Dad?

Since its beginnings nearly 40 years ago, Head Start has understood that loving, intentional parental involvement is an essential factor in healthy child development. Head Start works with parents because it believes that a healthy family is a child's best and most powerful resource. Strong families help to ensure positive outcomes for children and that they enter school ready to learn and succeed in their years there.

However, getting children prepared for life-long learning is typically viewed as mother's work. Dads are too often seen as optional in this part of their children's lives. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Why do we overlook dad in early childhood development? There may be a number of reasons.

- Head Start staff consists mostly of women who may identify with and are more comfortable with moms than dads.
- Some staff and mothers may harbor bad feelings toward fathers because of their own hurtful experiences.
- The culture of family and staff may promote the notion of women as primary caretakers, particularly of young children.
- Some staff and parents may not fully appreciate the key and unique role a father plays in his child's healthy development.
- Some staff may assume that fathers do not show up because they do not want to participate.
- Some staff may simply not know how to get fathers involved.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Moms and dads need to see parenting as a partnership, and they need to see Head Start as a place where they can get help, support, and encouragement in succeeding at the most important job they have: being active, loving, and nurturing parents. *That is what the effort to get fathers involved in Head Start is all about*.

Photo by D. Mentzer, Rosemount Center HS

If our American way of life fails the child, it fails us all.

—*Pearl Buck*

Principles of Family Involvement in Head Start

- Head Start recognizes that both mothers and fathers play an essential role in the healthy development of the children who learn here.
- Head Start recognizes that children benefit from a strong, cooperative relationship between mother and father.
- Head Start helps *both* mother and father become effective in helping their children become life-long learners.
- Head Start helps mothers and fathers understand and appreciate the vital and unique roles they play in their child's healthy development.
- Head Start recognizes, appreciates, and wants to learn about both parents, as fully as possible, regardless of whether the parents reside in the same home.
- Head Start strives to invite mother and father, by name and in their primary language, to Head Start programs and functions.
- Head Start seeks to make both mothers and fathers feel welcome and supported.
- Head Start seeks to offer programs that are meaningful to both mothers and fathers.

"We believe a child with a loving, involved father and mother is a child who has a great head start in life."

Fatherlessness is our nation's most pressing social problem.

—*David Blankenhorn,* Fatherless America

Photo by B. Beavers, Dane County Parent Council

Emphasizing Father Involvement in Head Start

Since the birth of Head Start in 1965, the picture of the American family has changed dramatically: divorced, single-parent, step- and cohabiting families all have increased. This means more children are growing up without fathers or living with men who are not their biological fathers. Many, indeed *most*, single parents are doing admirable jobs at raising their children, often with the help of Head Start programs. But more than two decades of social science research have revealed that fatherlessness can be harmful for children. (See *Building Block 1*.)

This impressive body of research gave shape to a mushrooming fatherhood movement that began in the early 1990s. In 1994, the National Fatherhood Initiative held the first-ever National Summit on Fatherhood in Dallas, Texas. Since then, many organizations have arisen to help combat the problem of fatherlessness. They help fathers realize how important they are to the healthy development of their children and help them to become more involved.

To achieve the highest possible outcomes for children, Head Start programs must make every effort to involve fathers in the lives of their children. Research demonstrates clearly that positive father involvement contributes substantially to child well-being. Children who grow up with an active father in their lives, on average, are less likely to do poorly or drop out of school, develop substance abuse problems, commit crimes, and suffer from other social or emotional problems.

Photo by L. Griffins, Little Feathers HS

Two distinct themes consistently emerged as reasons fathers got involved in early literacy programs with their children: (1) to provide their child with a head start in reading and writing, and (2) to increase bonding with their child.

—Early Childhood Educational Journal

Understanding Head Start Fathers

There are many stereotypes about unwed, non-custodial fathers. "Deadbeat" is a common one, suggesting men who make babies then disappear. In truth, many non-custodial fathers are men who want to be involved in their children's lives.

The Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project finds that nearly half (45 percent) of infants and toddlers in Head Start have fathers living in the home and a quarter (25 percent) have non-resident dads involved in their lives. Most Early Head Start programs (74 percent) have at least some children whose fathers are incarcerated.[1]

The National Center on Fathers and Families identifies seven "generalities" about low-income fathers:

- These fathers care about their children, even if they are not always on the scene or able to show their love in conventional ways.
- A father who lives in the home is more likely to contribute to the family's economic health, provide social support, and help with child development and care.
- Joblessness discourages some fathers from getting involved with their children.
- Legal limitations like custody, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment and disputes can keep fathers out of their child's life.
- Many young, unwed fathers and mothers need help learning how to share parenting duties.
- Many young fathers are unsure of their role as a parent and have difficulty transitioning into fatherhood.
- Young fathers (and mothers) can be negatively influenced by their own experiences as children.

In addition, the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project finds that:

- Nearly half (44 percent) of Early Head Start children live in the same home as their fathers; and
- When the father is closely involved in the young child's life, the child is less likely to exhibit behavior problems, aggressiveness, and hyperactivity.

Photos by T. D. Summers, Child-Adult Resource Services; B. Beavers, Dane County Parent Council; C. Dyer, Higher Horizons HS

Head Start programs with fatherhood involvement efforts realized significantly higher levels of involvement from dads than programs that did not offer such programs.

—J. Fagan, University of Pennsylvania

Why Are Some Fathers More Likely to Be Involved in Their Child's Education and Development?

It is helpful for programs to understand patterns of father involvement and why some fathers are more likely to be involved than others. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education that examined fathers' involvement in their children's schools found:

Percentage of fathers who did *not* participate in any school activity in a school year:

- Non-residential fathers (in contact with their children) 69%
- Fathers from two-parent families 25%

Percentage of fathers who participated in *at least one* school activity in a year:

- Non-residential fathers (in contact with their children) 22%
- Fathers from two-parent families 53%

Only 18 percent of non-resident fathers participated in at least two activities and only 9 percent participated in three or more school activities. These activities were most likely to be sporting events or general school meetings.[2]

Factors Associated with Father Involvement

Recent research finds low-income fathers who participate in religious organizations several times a week spend, on average, 169 more hours per year involved with their children than other fathers. In fact, religious involvement—more than any other form of civic engagement—was associated with greater father involvement.[3]

Fathers who identify strongly with being a father are more likely to be involved with their young children. Head Start programs have a significant role to play in making both mothers and fathers aware of the importance of father involvement in child well-being. This is critical because mothers play an important role in promoting father involvement.[4]

Fathers who identify strongly with being a father are more likely to be involved with their young children, marking the need for Head Start to cast a vision for the importance of fatherhood.

Photo by T. D. Summers, Child-Adult Resource Services

Another study found non-residential fathers are most likely to be involved in their child's education when:

- Their children are in K-5;
- The mother is well-educated and involved in her child's education; and
- The father is paying some level of child support.[5]

Both mother and father are more likely to be involved in their child's education when:

- Their child is younger;
- If they believe their involvement will make a real difference;
- If they have faith their child can do better in school; and
- If they have high educational aspirations for the child.[6]

Fathers are more likely to be involved in the early years of their child's school experience if the family participates in regular activities in the home and takes regular outings together. The likelihood of high father participation in school increased 17 percent with each additional shared family activity in a week.[7]

Additionally, both parents tend to be more involved in smaller schools than in larger ones. School policies, practices, and environment on parental participation play a key role also.[8]

Is your Head Start program actively inviting father participation, helping fathers understand the vital role they play, and making it easy and practical for dads to get involved?

The Positive Impact of Father Involvement/Intervention Programs

One study found that Head Start programs with fatherhood involvement efforts realized significantly higher levels of father participation than programs that did not make such efforts. When father involvement programs were offered, only 33 percent of fathers did not participate. When no father involvement efforts were made, 73 percent of fathers did not participate in program activities.[9]

Photo by D. Mentzer, NRC

Both mother and father are more likely to be involved in their child's education if they believe their involvement will make a real difference.

Summary of Findings

Fathers are more likely to be involved in the education of their children if:

- Father is married to mother;
- Father is religiously active;
- Child is male and younger than grade 6 *(Head Start fathers spent 16.15 more hours in a school year with sons than they did with daughters);*
- Mother is well-educated *(level of father's education was not as significant)*;
- Mother is involved in the academic life of the child;
- Father is paying some level of child support;
- Father and mother participate in regular activities in and outside of the home;
- The school is smaller, orderly, and expects good behavior;
- Father believes his participation can make a difference; and
- The school intentionally works to offer fathers practical, encouraging ways to be involved.

Head Start programs can use this information in considering how to enhance their father involvement efforts. Extend outreach efforts to all fathers in the community, recognizing what factors promote father involvement and what factors discourage it. Develop a strategy for reaching those fathers not as likely to become involved, as well as those who might be recruited more easily.

Photo by D. Mentzer, Rosemount Center HS

Are dads personally invited and encouraged to participate in program activities? Do you offer practical ideas for involvement?

Photo by B. Beavers, Dane County Parent Council

Taking Stock: How Well Does Your Program Involve Fathers?

The following activities will help Head Start programs evaluate how well they are doing at involving fathers.

1. Review active parent involvement/family partnership activities.

2. How involved are parents in general? How much opportunity do they have to be involved? How is the program intentionally attracting and including fathers?

3. How have parents (especially fathers) been helped to appreciate the important role they play in their child's development? List ways this could be improved.

4. Are there men on staff? Are they visible and interacting with mothers and fathers?

5. Describe the fathers in the program.

- What is known about them?
- How many actively participate? How many do not?
- What keeps them from participating?
- What attracts those who do participate?
- How many are married to the child's mother and live in the same home?
- How healthy is the relationship with the child's mother?
- How much is known about non-resident dads?
- How many are custodial, single fathers?
- What are the problems and frustrations fathers often feel in parenting?

In one program evaluation, it was found that Head Start staff addressed only the mother in the intake process, even when the father was sitting right there. When asked why the father wasn't addressed also, the staff was not aware that he was being excluded. Be sure to treat dad like a player in the game.

6. In the enrollment process, what steps are being taken to fully involve fathers? How is information gathered on fathers who do not live with their children? Are dads personally invited and encouraged to participate in the program with practical ideas for how to participate? Is this information conveyed in the father's primary language? How could father participation be improved at enrollment?

7. What are the most common services that are provided to fathers during the family partnership process? How well are these services being received?

8. What services are needed by fathers in the community but are currently lacking?

9. List current community partners.

10. List prospective community partners.

The most important commitment [a program] can make when it becomes involved in serving fathers is to sustain the program long enough for it to be successful. Dropping a program too early due to slow growth is worse than not starting one in the first place.

—Preston J. Garrison, National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Inc.

Photo by W. C. Siegel, Kentucky HS; D. Mentzer, Rosemount Center HS.

Recognizing and Breaking Down Barriers to Father Involvement

In efforts to increase father involvement in Head Start programs, it is important to recognize and be sensitive to barriers that might keep fathers from participating.

Preston J. Garrison, of the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, identifies some of those barriers. He notes that many barriers may exist in both staff and the mothers themselves, including:

- Possibility of conflict between custodial and non-custodial parents as they participate in the program
- Fear that increased male involvement in the program might challenge the safety of the children
- Concern over increased funding needs for serving men and the possibility that this will drain money used to serve mothers and children
- Lack of staff experience and confidence in working with men and lack of understanding on how father involvement supports other program priorities

Some other barriers to father involvement are more general.

Do you know their names?

Do recruiting processes directly invite fathers? If an invitation is sent "To the parent(s) of…," most assume that means the mother. If programs want fathers to come to an event, they need to invite them by name and in their primary language.

Do fathers feel comfortable?

Does the physical environment of the program make fathers feel welcome? Men are less likely to feel comfortable if the center is seen as a place primarily for women and children. Ask men to provide ideas for making simple changes in the center to make it more inviting and comfortable for men in the community.

Are fathers intimidated?

Some fathers may not have had a good experience in school and are not comfortable in an educational setting. Maybe they cannot read and fear their secret might be revealed. Help fathers understand that they can enjoy books with their kids simply by asking questions about the scenes in books or by making up their own stories based on the pictures. Head Start family literacy efforts can also help fathers to increase their reading skills.

Do fathers have time?

Work and schedule conflicts can keep fathers from participating in the program just as they can with mothers. Creative scheduling and taking activities to where fathers are can be very helpful.

Do fathers know they can make a difference?

Research shows that mothers and fathers are more likely to be involved in their children's education if they believe they can make a difference. Head Start programs can help parents understand how their smallest, simplest contributions can have big benefits for their children. Help parents recognize the power of their involvement. Develop activities for fathers that relate to their strengths and interests. Typically, for instance, men like to solve problems. Organize an event that takes advantage of this in some practical way.

To recap:

- Are fathers invited and welcomed by name and in their primary language?
- Are they made to feel comfortable and useful when they come?
- Do they understand how vital their most simple participation is to their child's well-being?
- Are copies of the child's progress report sent to both the mother and father?
- Are creative and practical volunteer opportunities for fathers identified?
- Are fathers involved as recruiters for uninvolved fathers?
- Does the in-take and assessment process involve and collect information about both resident and non-resident fathers?

When a Head Start program has decided to work with fathers actively, Garrison recommends having an outside consultant conduct a program assessment that would include a review of policies, procedures, and staff attitudes. There are fatherhood organizations that conduct such assessments.

By recognizing the barriers to father involvement that might exist within Head Start programs or within fathers themselves, the barriers can be overcome more successfully. The resulting increase in father involvement can enhance positive outcomes for children in Head Start.

Photo by B. Blanken, Rosemount Center HS

Endnotes

[1] Helen Raikes, Welmoet VanKammen, and Kimberly Boller, "Fathers' Involvement in Early Head Start Programs: Summary Report" (November 17, 2001) from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, p. 2, 4.

[2] Christine Winquist Nord, DeeAnn Brimhall, and Jerry West, *Fathers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools*. National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education NCES 98-091, 1997.

[3] W. Bradford Wilcox, *Good Dads: Religion, Civic Engagement, & Paternal Involvement in Low-Income Communities*, (Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, University of Pennsylvania, 2002), p. 12-13.

[4] M. Carlson and S. McLanahan, "Characteristics and Antecedents of Involvement by Young, Unmarried Fathers, *Center for Research on Child Well-being*," Working Paper #02-09-FF, 2002.

[5] Nord, Brimhill and West, 1997.

[6] J.S. Eccles and R. D. Harold, "Family Involvement in Children's and Adolescents' Schooling," in A. Booth and J.F. Dunn, eds., *Family-School Links: How Do They Affect Educational Outcomes?* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996); Nord, Barhill and West, 1997.

[7] Nord, Barhill and West, 1997.

[8] J.L. Epstein. and S.L. Dauber, "School Programs and Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement in Inner-City Elementary and Middle Schools," Elementary School Journal, (1991) 91:289-303; J.S. Coleman and T. Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*. (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Nord, Barhill and West, 1997.

[9] J. Fagan, *Predictors of Father and Father Figure Involvement in Pre-Kindergarten Head Start*. National Center on Fathers and Families, University of Pennsylvania, 1999.