

# CFRP POLICY BRIEF

## Increasing Father Participation in Home Visiting: Lessons from Mothers

Home visiting programs aim to enhance children's outcomes by building supportive home environments, encouraging positive parenting practices, and helping parents access vital resources. Traditionally, the programs have primarily focused on mothers, thereby limiting father involvement in the programs, and the programs' impact on fathers.<sup>1</sup> By increasing father participation, home visiting programs can broaden their scope of influence with the families who they serve. There is limited research, however, to inform programs that are interested in increasing father participation. This brief aims to fill this gap in the research by building a better understanding of why and how fathers are participating in programs; outlining the main barriers to father participation; and presenting strategies that may be effective for overcoming these barriers.

This brief presents the perspectives of the individuals who are the main intermediary between program providers and fathers: mothers. Assessing mothers' perspectives on father participation in home visiting programs is valuable for a number of reasons. First, many program providers may only interact with mothers in the families who they serve, and will need to work with mothers to access fathers. Second, mothers' may be an ally for programs that are interested in increasing father participation, or they may be a barrier to engaging fathers; understanding mothers' concerns and expectations will help programs target their services effectively. Finally, because levels of father participation in programs are currently low, it is difficult to collect data from a representative sample of fathers.

The mothers' perspectives presented in this brief come from data collected through a survey of 212 mothers whose families are enrolled in home visiting programs in seven communities across Texas. The mothers were enrolled in one of four home visiting program models: Early Head Start Home Based (EHS-

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<sup>1</sup> Duggan, A., Fuddy, L., McFarlane, E., Burrell, L., Windham, A., Higman, S., and Sia, C. (2004) Evaluating a Statewide Home Visiting Program to Prevent Child Abuse in at-Risk Families of Newborns: Fathers' Participation and Outcomes. *Child Maltreatment*, 9, 3-17.

Raikes, H. H., Summers, J. A., & Roggman, L. A. (2005). Father Involvement in Early Head Start Research Programs. *Fathering*, 3, 29-52.

HB), Home Instruction for Parents of Pre-school Youngsters (HIPPY), Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), and Parents as Teachers (PAT). The sample included expectant mothers and mothers of children ages zero to five. Where applicable, the survey findings are complemented with qualitative data collected from focus groups with fathers whose families are enrolled in the programs, and from interviews with home visitors who serve the families.

## Research Questions

This brief addresses five research questions that inform administrators, program staff, and researchers who are interested in increasing father engagement in home visiting programs:

1. How do mothers want fathers to participate in home visiting?
2. How are fathers participating in home visiting?
3. What do mothers perceive are the main barriers to father participation?
4. What do mothers believe would be effective strategies for encouraging father participation?
5. What family characteristics may influence the strategies that will be effective for engaging fathers?

## Findings

Based on an analysis of the survey responses, focus groups, and interviews, five primary findings emerged:

### **Most mothers want their child's father to be involved in home visiting.**

The majority of mothers indicate that they support home visiting programs' efforts to engage fathers, which suggests that many mothers are potential allies for the programs. Many mothers, however, express that they only want their child's father to participate in the program some of the time, suggesting that many mothers' perceive there are some parts of the programs that are exclusively for them and/or their child. Mothers' preferences related to father participation vary substantially by father's co-residence and relationship status; indeed unmarried mothers and mothers who do not live with their child's father are less likely to want father participation than their married and co-resident counterparts.

### **Fathers are engaging with the programs in ways that are not measured.**

Programs currently measure father participation based on whether the father attends the home visits or other program events; however, this may underestimate the full scope of father participation. Mothers indicate that although few fathers regularly attend home visits and program events, the majority of fathers ask questions about the visits and practice lessons from the visits with their child or partner some of the time. Mothers who want their child's father to be involved in the program at least some of the time were more likely to indicate that their child's father was engaging with the program in some way. Mothers' reports of all types of father participation were lower among parents who do not live together than those cohabit, and reports of father participation were lowest among parents who are not in any type of romantic relationship.

### **The largest barrier to father participation is fathers' work schedules.**

Consistent with reports from fathers collected through focus groups, mothers report that fathers' work schedules are the largest barrier to father participation. This was particularly true for married and unmarried cohabiting parents, among whom work schedules were cited more than any other barrier. Mothers who are not in any type of relationship with their child's father were more likely to indicate that relationship issues are barrier to father participation, and that they do not want their child's father to be involved in the program.

### **Mothers believe flexible scheduling and active outreach to fathers could increase their participation.**

Most mothers indicate that they want programs to encourage fathers to participate, and express that the most effective ways to encourage father participation is through flexible scheduling, and "invite dad" strategies. "Invite dad" strategies include direct communications with fathers about the importance of their involvement with their children, and the benefits of their participation in home visiting. Mothers did not think that strategies such as hiring male staff and holding father-only events would be as effective as these "invite dad" strategies.

### **Family violence is an important consideration that may influence father engagement in some families, but most mothers indicate that fathers can be safely engaged in the programs.**

Most mothers report that fathers can be safely engaged in home visiting programs, but some mothers did report that they or their children had been victims of family violence. The rates of violence reported by mothers suggests that family violence is not a barrier to engaging fathers in most families but reinforce the critical importance of training and support for home visitors on addressing family violence.

## **Lessons Learned**

These findings related to mothers' preferences for father participation can inform home visiting programs' strategies for working with fathers and improve the methods that programs and researchers use to measure father participation. Given the limited prior research on specific strategies that are effective for engaging fathers in early childhood programs, the data collected from mothers helps us build a deeper understanding of program strategies that may be effective and a better understanding of the family characteristics that are likely to moderate the efficacy of different approaches.

### **Programs should use "invite dad" strategies to encourage father participation in home visiting programs.**

Effective strategies for encouraging father participation in home visiting programs may include communicating that fathers are invited to participate and accommodating fathers' work schedules to strongly signal that their participation is valued. Perhaps the simplest strategy that programs can use to increase father participation is to consistently initiate conversations about engaging fathers with the mothers they serve. If programs are interested in consistently engaging fathers in the program activities

in which the curriculum is delivered, including home visits and program activities, staff may need to take “invite dad” strategies to the next level and employ more flexible scheduling policies to accommodate fathers’ work schedules.

Programs may also consider adapting their curriculum to address the parenting practices that resonate with fathers, as well as helping parents understand the benefits of other types of father involvement for their child. In the father focus groups, many fathers indicated that they have distinct gendered parenting roles in their families and that they associate the mothering role with their family’s program participation. As a result, fathers may be more likely to actively participate if programs provide supplementary curricula that is consistent with the way fathers define their fathering role. Based on fathers’ feedback during the focus groups, this may include financial management, discipline, and co-parenting support.

These “invite dad” strategies are most likely to be effective for resident fathers and non-resident fathers who are in a relationship with their child’s mother. Alternative strategies may be needed to engage fathers who are not in any type of relationship with their child’s mother, and in some cases, it may not be appropriate to engage these fathers.

### **Improved data collection is needed to accurately assess the ways that fathers are engaging with home visiting programs.**

Mothers’ reports of father participation show that the majority of fathers are at least indirectly engaging with the home visiting programs, and indicate a need for improved data collection to capture the ways that fathers are participating. Home visiting programs that are interested in increasing father participation may consider measuring both fathers’ formal and informal participation in the program. Programs should define their measurements based on their curriculum, but could include measures such as father attendance at program activities, homework completed by fathers, and lessons the father practiced with the child or mother. Collecting these more nuanced measures of father engagement in the program will be necessary for building a better understanding of the ways fathers are participating, and for linking father participation to family outcomes. Programs should also collect demographic information about fathers, so they can assess the father characteristics that influence father participation, and the efficacy of the different strategies that they are employing.

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