

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Involving Fathers in Home Visiting Programs: Lessons from the Dads

Father involvement is associated with positive outcomes for children.¹ Indeed, children with highly involved fathers have fewer behavioral problems,² higher educational attainment,³ and lower levels of emotional distress⁴ than children with less involved fathers. Fathers also uniquely contribute to children's healthy attachment,⁵ emotional regulation,⁶ social competence,⁷ and cognitive development.⁸

Despite the importance of father involvement, a dearth of research exists on how to increase and improve a father's involvement with his child. Most programs aimed at helping parents are focused on mothers, whereas few programs actively seek father participation. One objective of CFRP's Texas Home Visiting Program (THVP) evaluation is to create a broad understanding of how to increase father participation in early childhood services, particularly home visiting programs.ⁱ The evaluation aims to identify programmatic strategies and attitudes, as well as family characteristics that enhance or limit father participation in home visiting programs. As part of this objective, CFRP conducted focus groups with fathers in four communities across Texas.

The main purpose of the father focus groups is to understand fathers' beliefs and attitudes regarding father engagement, as well as their perspectives and experiences with home visiting programs. Although findings resulting from these focus groups are based on fathers' experiences with home visiting programs, these findings may also be applied to other early childhood services.

CFRP worked with THVP programs to recruit a sample of fathers from programs across four communities in Texas. Focus groups consisted only of fathers with the exception of one community in which the focus group had both fathers and mothers. Fathers in the focus groups represented a variety of demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Almost all fathers who participated were residential fathers, meaning

ⁱ A home visiting program is a program in which services are delivered to families within their homes.

that they lived with the mothers of their children.ⁱⁱ This brief presents the general findings from the father focus groups.

Fathers love their children and desire to be good fathers.

All of the fathers who participated in the focus groups expressed how much they loved their children and desired to be a good father. Nevertheless, fathers' perspectives of what constitutes an ideal father varied across regions. Most fathers participating in the focus groups noted that an ideal father is someone who is "there" for his children, provides for them, and acts as a role model. For many fathers, "being there" and providing a positive example meant breaking negative cycles from their pasts. Many of the fathers did not have positive experiences with their own fathers, and most reported their own fathers' absence. Views of the ideal father also differed: in some communities, fathers believed that it is their responsibility to expose their children to the "harsh realities of life" to prepare them for the future. In other communities, fathers felt their role was to protect their children from negative influences and to model positive behavior.

Fathers value the services provided by the programs.

Fathers of newborns and infants valued the medical and developmental information their home visitors provided. Fathers of older children expressed pride in the developmental milestones and achievements their children reached through home visiting programs. In general, fathers felt that the mothers had a positive relationship with their home visitors and saw home visitors as trusted sources of information.

Fathers believe that services are geared toward mothers.

Fathers noted that when they learned about home visiting, they thought it was a "female activity," in part because most home visitors were female and the marketing materials did not target or mention fathers. Fathers also reported that their work schedules prevented them from participating in more home visits. Those fathers who had taken part in a home visit recounted that they felt welcome because the home visitor invited them to participate. Some fathers participated in parent group meetings; however, the fathers with whom CFRP spoke described that none of the outreach materials for the group meetings explicitly communicated that fathers were welcome. When fathers attended a group meeting, they often were the only man in the room.

One of my goals is just to try not to be like my father. I just know his name because it's the same name as mine. Other than that, I've never really met him.

– Father, West TX

There aren't too many three year-olds that can put a puzzle together. [My son] got upset when I showed him. He wants to be self-determined, to do it himself without help. A lot of children, they will ask for assistance. He chose to struggle until he found it.

– Father, South TX

When I first saw [our home visitor] come in, I was a bit intimidated. After the first visit, she told me, "Why don't you come over and sit down?" She had a comforting attitude. It is important that the home visitor be like – "Hey, come in, this is going to benefit you as well."

– Father, South TX

ⁱⁱ Fathers who participated in the focus groups may not be representative of all fathers who have families enrolled in home visiting; fathers recruited for focus group are likely more involved with their children and home visiting programs than the average father.

Fathers expressed desire for a father advocate and a dad's group.

Fathers reported, "it takes a dad to involve other dads." They believe programs should encourage the fathers who are already involved to spread the word to other fathers in the community. Fathers reported that a father-only group would be a welcome place to learn from other fathers' experiences with their children. One father said that having weekly meetings just for fathers "helped us unite as fathers and share experiences. [The father advocate] pushes everyone to talk together in the meetings, sometimes about controversial topics, but it makes us feel like we're more of a community."

Fathers desired parenting resources and other wrap-around services.

In every community, fathers expressed interest in a variety of services that home visiting programs could provide. They wanted practical information about how to care for their children (i.e. playing, feeding, burping, changing diapers, etc.). They also wanted services that could help them strengthen their relationships with the mothers of their children or better provide for their families. Specifically, fathers mentioned communication and relationship workshops, and services that help with goal setting, financial literacy, finding a job, and English lessons.

As a dad, not knowing English is a problem because I can't help [my child] in school.
– Father, Northeast TX

Conclusions and Recommendations

The focus groups revealed that fathers are very proud of their children and desire to be good role models. Fathers greatly value home visiting services and are impressed by the improvement they have observed in their partners' parenting skills, as well as their children's cognitive and language abilities. Fathers offered very few suggestions of how the programs can better involve fathers; instead, they emphasized the importance of explicitly involving fathers in activities. Specifically, they suggested that programs should:

- Invite fathers to participate. In several cases, fathers reported that all it took for them to move from not participating in home visits to participating was outreach from the home visitor.
- "Sell" the mothers on the importance of father involvement; mothers often act as gatekeepers between fathers and the program.
- Invite fathers to watch their children's reactions to new activities or give fathers a specific role or task during home visits. Fathers reported enjoying having a role during home visits.
- Schedule home visits during times that fathers can attend – perhaps during lunch breaks.
- Set aside homework assignments for fathers to complete with their children in the evening if fathers are unable to attend home visits.
- Offer parent meetings that address topics of interest to fathers; if a program is unsure what would appeal to dads, ask them for ideas or provide a suggestion box.
- Many fathers report "it takes a dad to involve other dads." They believe programs should encourage the fathers who are already involved to spread the word to other fathers in the

community. If possible, programs should hire a father advocate to reach out to fathers during home visits or parent meetings.

For more information about CFRP's long-term evaluation of the Texas Home Visiting Program, please go to <http://hv.childandfamilyresearch.org>.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

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