

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Retaining Families in Home Visiting Programs by Promoting Father Participation

Home visiting programs provide structured visits by trained professionals and paraprofessionals to high-risk parents who are expecting or have young children. These programs support families by providing health check-ups, screenings, referrals, and parenting advice toward the broad goals of enhancing school readiness, preventing maltreatment, and promoting maternal and child health. Research on home visiting has shown that improvements in targeted outcomes are likelier when families stay enrolled for longer periods of up to several years. This brief highlights the findings of the Father Participation and Retention Evaluation (FPRE), which examines how family characteristics are associated with longer enrollment in home visiting programs, and specifically whether fathers' participation in these programs is linked to how long families stay enrolled in services. Findings indicate that when fathers are involved in home visiting programs, families stay enrolled an average of seven months longer than families in which fathers are not involved. This finding suggests that engaging fathers to participate may be a viable strategy to maximize retention in home visiting because families may stay longer when both parents are invested.

Benefits of Home Visiting Programs

High-quality home visiting programs are associated with better maternal and infant health, enhanced school readiness, reduced rates of maltreatment, and higher levels of parent education and income.

Home visiting programs serve at-risk parents who are expecting or have young children, providing structured in-home support to parents and monitoring children's attainment of developmental milestones. Quality home visiting programs help parents provide safe and supportive environments for their children, which can lead to lasting benefits for the entire family. Prior research has demonstrated that high-quality home visiting programs are associated with better maternal and infant health,¹ enhanced school readiness for children,² reduced rates of abuse and neglect,³ and higher levels of parent education and income.⁴ Home visiting is also a good investment; one rigorous research study found that for every tax dollar spent on high-quality home visiting programs, there is a return of more than five dollars due to reduced spending on health and welfare services.⁵

Father Participation and Retention in Home Visiting Programs

Although there is considerable research demonstrating that home visiting programs are linked to improved outcomes for children and families, most studies have found evidence of outcome improvement based on family enrollment of one, two, or even more years. Unfortunately, as home visiting expands across the country, families are leaving programs earlier. Because families who leave home visiting programs before completion may not be enrolled long enough to attain the optimal benefits of participation, engaging and retaining families is a key implementation concern.

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) contracted with the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) to conduct the Father Participation and Retention Evaluation (FPRE). This evaluation included an examination of whether fathers' involvement in home visiting programs in Texas is related to how long families stay enrolled. The evaluation used both administrative program data and surveys of enrolled mothers from 27 home visiting program sites across the state to analyze retention patterns and their relationship to father participation.

Families whose fathers participated in at least one home visit were enrolled nearly seven months longer than families whose fathers did not participate in any home visits.

The findings of this evaluation indicate that families whose fathers participated in at least one home visit were enrolled for an average of 17.2 months, which is nearly *seven months longer* than the average 10.6 month enrollment of families whose fathers did not participate in any home visits. This finding holds even while statistically accounting for various family characteristics (including parent age, marital status, poverty status, and race/ethnicity), the specific home visiting program model, and the community in which families received services.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Understanding how father participation is linked to family retention in home visiting programs provides home visiting practitioners, administrators, and policymakers with an important tool for improving family engagement and retention. The findings indicate that father participation is positively linked to family retention, which suggests that engaging all family members, including fathers, may lead to longer periods of enrollment and thus maximize the benefits of home visiting.

To promote family retention, home visiting programs can take active steps to foster participation of fathers in services, such as:

- To the extent possible, offer flexible scheduling of home visits and other program meetings on evenings and weekends. This may allow working fathers who would not otherwise be able to attend to participate more frequently.

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CFRP Policy Brief | B.029.0517

May 2017

- Tailor program materials to be “dad-friendly” to promote father engagement. Using inclusive language, such as “parent” instead of just “mother,” or developing program content that is particularly appealing to dads may make fathers feel more welcome and wanted in home visiting services.
- Simply inviting fathers to participate in visits and meetings may be a direct and effective way to get dads more involved in home visiting programs.

Implementing these recommendations or other adaptations to home visiting programs to expand father outreach has the potential to engage more fathers and may ultimately lead to more families enrolled for longer periods to maximize the benefits of public investment in these crucial programs.

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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.

¹ Lee, E., Mitchell-Herzfeld, S.D., Lowenfels, A.A., Greene, R., Dorabawila, V., & DuMont, K.A. (2009). Reducing low birth weight through home visitation. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 36(2), 154-160.

² Olds, D. L., Kitzman, H., Cole, R., Robinson, J., Sidora, K., Luckey, D. W., et al. (2004). Effects of nurse home-visiting on maternal life course and child development: Age 6 follow-up results of a randomized trial. *Pediatrics*, 114(6), 1550-1559.

³ Howard, K. S. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2009). The role of home-visiting programs in preventing child abuse and neglect. *The Future of Children*, 19(2), 119-146.

⁴ Carneiro, P., Meghir, C., & Parey, M. (2013). Maternal education, home environments, and the development of children and adolescents. *Journey of the European Economic Association*, 11(1), 123-160.

⁵ Karoly, L. A., Kilburn, M. R., & Cannon, J.S. (2005). *Childhood interventions: Proven results, future promise*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.