

Engaging Fathers: Home Visitor Attitudes and Strategies

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Abstract

Despite the potential benefits of involving fathers in early home visiting (EHV) programs, home visitors (HVs) still experience barriers to engaging fathers. This study explores the context of father engagement in EHV services as well as the barriers faced by HVs and strategies used to encourage fathers' participation. Results indicate HV preparedness to engage fathers in home visits varied as a function of agency father friendliness and supervisor support for father engagement. HVs perception of father importance also varied as a function of agency father friendliness. Additionally, participants with training in social work or social welfare reported higher levels of father engagement preparation and viewed fathers as naturally sensitive more than those without such training. HVs also commented on the various strategies they use to engage fathers prior to, during, after, or in addition to home visits.

Literature Review

Father involvement in early childhood has been linked to: better cognitive outcomes (Roggman et al., 2004), lower levels of internalized disorders (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid & Bremberg, 2008), lower levels of problem behaviors in children (Choi & Jackson, 2011), and improved mother-infant attachment quality (Hossain, 1994). HVs experience several barriers to engaging fathers including: inadequate institutional structures and organizational philosophies (McAllister, Wilson, & Burton, 2004), negative stereotypes about fathers' capabilities as child care providers (McAllister, Wilson, & Burton, 2004), lack of training (McAllister, Wilson, & Burton, 2004), and logistical barriers, such as recruitment, scheduling conflicts, and safety concerns (Child and Family Research Partnership, 2014).

Purpose & Research Questions

The present study seeks to (a) investigate key HV and agency characteristics as predictors of HV attitudes about fathers and father engagement and (b) report strategies used and recommended by home visitors to encourage father involvement in home visits. The specific research questions are: 1. What level of attitudes toward father engagement, beliefs about father importance, agency father-friendliness, and father-related support from supervisors do HVs report?; 2. Do attitudes toward father engagement and beliefs about father importance vary as a function of HV characteristics (education level, education field, years of experience, prior father-related training, or caseload) or agency context (agency father-friendliness and father-related support from supervisors)?; 3. What strategies do HVs report for engaging fathers prior, during, and after home visits, as well as events or activities outside home visits?

Method

Participants: The sample for the present study consisted of 81 HVs from 7 agencies operating at 10 sites across the state of Tennessee.

Procedures and Instrument: We conducted "Tennessee Dad Welcome Events" in April 2016 at four locations across the state and encouraged participants to complete a background survey at the end of each event.

Measures: Education level; Education field; Attitudes toward father engagement (Guterman et al., 2013); General support from supervisor (Guterman et al., 2013); Father engagement support from supervisor (Guterman et al., 2013); Beliefs about father importance – Adapted from the Role of the Father Questionnaire (Palkovitz, 1984) to be used with home visitors intended to tap home visitors' perspectives on the importance of fathers to children; Agency father friendliness – subscales of the Dakota Father Friendliness Assessment designed to measure participants' perspectives on their agency's level of father friendliness (White, Brotherson, Galovan, Holmes, & Kampmann, 2011); Father engagement strategies – assessed using three open-ended questions: 1. What, if any, strategies do you use to try to engage fathers in home visits?; 2. Which of those strategies have been effective?; 3. If funding were not a concern, what idea would you pitch to increase fathers' participation in home visiting?

Analyses & Findings

RQ1: Descriptive statistics for all variable and constructed scales of interest provided upon request.

RQ2: A series of t-tests, correlations and one-way ANOVAs (as appropriate).

- *Prepared to engage fathers* varied as a function of *agency father friendly attitudes* ($r = .47$; $p < .001$), *agency father friendly behaviors* ($r = .62$; $p < .001$), and *supervisor support for father engagement* ($r = .39$; $p < .001$).
- *Father importance* also varied as a function of *agency father friendly attitudes* ($r = .29$; $p < .01$).
- *Enjoy working with fathers* varied as a function of *supervisor father engagement support* ($r = .24$, $p < .05$).
- Participants with formal training in *social work/social welfare* had higher means on *father engagement preparation* ($M = 4.06$) than those without such training ($M = 3.67$, $t = 2.39$; $p < .05$).
- Participants with formal training in *social work/social welfare* also had higher means on *father natural sensitivity* ($M = 3.27$) than those without such training ($M = 2.76$, $t = 2.63$; $p < .05$).

RQ3: The three open-ended questions analyzed using template analysis (King, 1998; 2004). We identified four a priori broad codes and three researchers coded each transcript by phrase. Sample quotes from each of these codes are provided:

- Pre-Home Visit Strategies: "Discussing with Mom the Dad's schedule to invite the Dad to visits."
- During Home Visit Strategies: "If the father is involved in the visits, I try to make sure and ask his opinion on what we are talking about as well as praising him when he talks about his achievements for the week."
- Post-Home Visit Strategies: "I leave information or do group visits as much as possible."
- Events and Activities outside Home Visits: "At parent parties we engage fathers by providing information such as water safety that is also interesting to fathers and mothers. We often include crafts that dads enjoy too!"

Take Away Messages

- Participants with educational background in Social Work and Social Welfare backgrounds viewed fathers as being more naturally sensitive and reported higher levels of preparedness to engage fathers in EHV services than participants without that educational background.
- Agency climate — specifically father friendly organizational behaviors and attitudes — predicts HVs preparedness to engage fathers in home visits and HVs perceptions of father importance.
- HVs comments suggest a wide range of "during home visit" father engagement strategies; other strategies (before, after, or different than home visits) were mentioned less frequently.

Key References

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