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## **Predictors of Father and Father Figure Involvement in Pre-Kindergarten Head Start**

### **Key Findings**

- Fathers in a male involvement intervention program were far more likely to spend any time in Head Start than were fathers in a comparison group.
- Fathers and father figures were significantly more likely to spend time in Head Start if they had a son in the program than a daughter.
- Nurturing fathers and father figures spent significantly more time in their child's Head Start program than non-nurturing males.
- There was a trend for fathers and father figures to spend more time in Head Start if the mother was also highly involved in the program.
- Teachers rated fathers and father figures as being more involved in Head Start if the mother was also involved in the program, if the father had a son rather than a daughter in the program, and if the child had fewer behavior problems.
- Father/male involvement projects have the potential to increase father and father figure involvement in Head Start. However, practitioners should be cautioned that such projects are likely to result in low levels of involvement in the program.
- Programs should educate parents about the importance of a father participating in their daughter's as well as their son's Head Start program.
- Fathers and father figures who already possess characteristics, such as nurturance, that are associated with involved parenting are more likely to participate in Head Start. These fathers may require the least amount of outreach to become involved in their child's program. Program staff should begin to think about strategies to encourage other fathers to participate, even though these men may be harder to involve.

### ***Implications for Practitioners***

- The study shows that making the effort to involve fathers and father figures in Head Start pays off—more fathers get involved with their sons. However, while father involvement programs do have an effect, the treatment resulted in relatively low levels of involvement. Therefore, practitioners must recognize that vigorous outreach is needed.
- In addition, practitioners need to understand some of the reasons why fathers are reluctant to get involved. These include such obstructions as jobs that are not flexible, but more generally, men may not believe they will enjoy the experience. Practitioners also need to be sensitive to the fact that some fathers cannot read. Staff sensitivity sessions to address assumptions and biases about father involvement can be helpful.
- Practitioners need to set up meaningful involvement for fathers as they are often not aware of what they could be doing to help. Such activities as creating a Father's Day Program, where fathers are encouraged to read and play with their children using educational materials is a successful form of encouragement. Fathers' support groups are also very helpful. In these groups, discussing such things as the meaning of fatherhood, men's feelings about childhood, mother-father relationships, child discipline and so forth, can be very useful.
- Practitioners also need to be aware that there is less father involvement with children with behavior problems and with daughters. The first step to increasing father involvement with daughters may simply be for both practitioners and parents to become aware that this is very important to girls. Fathers of children with behavior problems may have real difficulties with the relationship that need to be addressed.
- Practitioners need to work more closely with researchers to clarify the goals of father involvement programs—to decide, for instance, who are their target groups—all fathers, or especially ones who need help with their parenting skills.

### ***Implications for Researchers***

- As one of the key variables predicting father involvement is men's own nurturing qualities, researchers must learn more about these men. To what degree can these characteristics be taught, to what degree are they related to a certain concept of self or of masculinity, to what extent are they related to men's own childhood experiences, or to values?
- What prevents men from becoming more involved with their daughters? Is it just an oversight? Or are there other, more specific reasons?
- What prevents men from becoming more involved with their children who exhibit behavior problems? What can be done to facilitate a positive involvement with these children?
- What are practitioner needs? How can researchers assist agencies to plan more effective services to involve men?

### ***Implications for Policymakers***

- Policymakers need to recognize that welfare reform, which takes mothers out of the home and puts them in the workplace, requires new efforts to involve fathers and father-figures in the daily care of their children to help make up the caregiving deficit. The Head Start program offers a perfect opportunity to have a major effect. By honing the effectiveness of father-involvement programs such as this one, policymakers could eventually author legislation to incorporate such projects in the standard Head Start program.

## **Predictors of Father and Father Figure Involvement in Pre-Kindergarten Head Start**

There has been a growing interest in father and father figure involvement in Head Start during the past decade (Levine, 1993). Many Head Start programs around the country have started father/male involvement projects (Filmore, 1998; Levine & Pitt, 1995). Despite the proliferation of these programs, practitioners continue to report that many men are reluctant to participate in Head Start activities (Fagan, 1996). At the present time, there is little available information regarding the characteristics of fathers and father figures that become involved in Head Start. This Brief summarizes the results of a study conducted with Head Start fathers to determine factors that contribute to the likelihood of fathers and father figures participating in their child's Head Start program.

The growing interest in male involvement in Head Start has been influenced by a number of factors. One factor has been the body of evidence suggesting the importance of paternal involvement to children. Recent research gives evidence of the relationship between children's social competence and paternal behavior and involvement (e.g., Hart, DeWolf, Wozniak, & Burts, 1992; Lewis, 1997; Snarey, 1993). Research has also demonstrated positive associations between fathers' school involvement and children's academic outcomes (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). The negative effects on children of reduced contact with nonresidential fathers have also been extensively investigated (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Popenoe, 1996).

Recent changes in federal welfare legislation also may be a factor contributing to the growing interest in

paternal involvement in Head Start. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which requires parents (mostly mothers) receiving public assistance to be gainfully employed within two years, has placed greater demands on all family members, including fathers, to participate in the care giving and child rearing needs of young children. The new legislation has also specified as one of its objectives increasing children's access to both parents (Bernard, 1998).

An additional factor is the increasing recognition among practitioners and researchers of the presence of significant adult males in the lives of Head Start children. The profiles of Head Start families often have been generalized from Census Bureau data about families in poverty. According to the U. S. Bureau of the Census (1997), 60% of poor children lived in female-headed households with no husband present in 1995. While these data have been used to promote the belief that poor children are being raised without the presence of any significant adult males, several studies focusing specifically on Head Start families have provided a somewhat different picture of male presence. In a nationwide survey of Head Start programs serving poor families, Levine (1993) discovered that a man is present, whether the father, mother's boyfriend, or other male relative, in approximately 60% of Head Start families. In a small sample study of 59 randomly selected female caregivers with children in urban, suburban, and rural Head Start programs, fathers or father figures were reported to be present in 75% of the households (Fagan, Newash, & Schlosser, 1999). Almost all of the female caregivers reported a significant male's involvement in their Head Start child's life.

## Theoretical Model

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Researchers have noted that father involvement is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon (Coltrane, 1996; Lamb, 1997; Pleck, 1997). In an effort to better understand this complex phenomenon as it relates to low-income Head Start fathers, the author used an ecological model to explore various predictors of father involvement in Head Start. According to the ecological framework, parental behavior occurs within the context of multiple environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These factors may include characteristics of the child, family, Head Start program, as well as characteristics of the father himself.

Research has generally supported the hypothesis that fathers are more involved with their sons than daughters (Pleck, 1997). Some studies have suggested that the differential between paternal involvement with sons and daughters grows larger as children age (Roopnarine & Ahmeduzzaman, 1993). The gender differential also seems to be related to the type of activity with children. Fathers have been shown to engage in more play activity with sons than with daughters, but there is little to no difference in the amount of time spent with sons or daughters in caretaking (Levy-Shiff & Israelashvilli, 1988).

Children's social behavior also may influence paternal involvement in Head Start. The child temperament literature has shown that parents avoid social interactions, provide less sensory stimulation, are less responsive, and engage in fewer teaching efforts with temperamentally difficult children than with easy children (Peters-Martin & Wachs, 1984; Maccoby, Snow, & Jacklin, 1984). Child social behaviors that are more extreme or are perceived by fathers as being problematic may be associated with less paternal involvement. Moreover, paternal involvement in Head Start may be directly influenced by fathers' perceptions that their children have problematic behaviors, or it may be indirectly influenced by teachers' concerns about the child's behavior.

As for paternal variables, the father's labor force participation may have a significant impact on his involvement with children. The time availability hypothesis suggests that persons who have more "free" time, often measured as less time involved in paid labor, are

likely to be more available to do housework and child care work (Becker, 1981). Thus, it can be expected that fathers who are unemployed will have more time to spend with their children (e.g., Radin & Harold-Goldsmith, 1989).

Existing studies have shown that parental education is positively associated with parent involvement in children's schools (Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Less educated parents may feel more intimidated by the school setting and therefore may avoid participating in school activities (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). More educated parents may have higher aspirations for their children and believe that their participation in children's schooling has the potential to assist children to reach their goals (Eccles & Harrold, 1996).

Fathers' own characteristics may influence the level of their involvement with children. Researchers have suggested that fathers who are more skilled at parenting are likely to be more directly involved with their children (Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987). Skills such as nurturance of children may give fathers the self-confidence and motivation needed to have a higher level of engagement with children.

While there are many potentially important family variables that may influence paternal involvement in Head Start, this study focused on mothers' involvement in Head Start and family structure. Research has shown that fathers' involvement in their children's schools is positively associated with mothers' involvement (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). The close association between levels of maternal and paternal involvement in school may be a manifestation of the parents' shared values regarding the importance of education (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997).

As for family structure, this study examined whether biological fathers are more involved than non-biological fathers in their child's Head Start program. Residential status of the father was also examined. Nord, Brimhall, and West (1997) found that nonresident fathers are substantially less involved in their children's schools than are resident fathers.

The ecological model also emphasizes the importance of environmental influences, such as schools, on parent involvement. Size of the school has been shown to have a strong negative influence on levels of paren-

tal involvement (Zill & Nord, 1994). Other factors that are related to parental involvement are school policies and teacher attitudes (Epstein, 1990). The present study examined the impact of a father involvement program initiative on fathers' participation in Head Start.

## Method

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### Participants and procedures

One hundred and thirty-four fathers and father figures were recruited for this study. The majority of the men were African American (65.7%). A large number of fathers were Latino American (27.4%). On the average, fathers and father figures completed high school. Slightly more than half (58.1%) of the respondents participated in the labor force. The median total family income of participating fathers was \$10,000 per year. The majority of men were biological (67.8%) and residential (65%) fathers. Most reported being single, never married (59.6%), although a substantial number of men were married only once (27.4%).

Two cohorts of subjects were recruited. The first cohort was recruited in October 1995, and the second cohort was obtained in October 1996. Men who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed twice—once in October and again between mid-May and mid-June. The face-to-face interviews involved administering a series of questionnaires to obtain data on predictors of father involvement in Head Start (fall interview) and on fathers' self-perceptions of their Head Start involvement (spring interview).

### Description of the intervention

Of the 134 fathers recruited for this study, 50 were in the comparison group and 84 were in the father involvement intervention group. The intervention program involved adapting traditional Head Start parent involvement activities for fathers and father figures. The program components included: (1) father volunteering in the classroom; (2) special educational projects carried out by fathers and staff in the Head Start classroom (Father's Day Program); (3) father sensitivity training for early childhood staff members; (4) father support groups; and (5) father-child recreation activities.

### Instruments

Information regarding the father's parenting skills was obtained from the abbreviated version of the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI; Slater & Power, 1987). Only the nurturance scale was used in this study. The preschool version of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) was used to assess teachers' and parents' perceptions of the child's social problem behaviors. Data regarding fathers' biological and residential status, employment, and education were obtained from a family background questionnaire developed for this study.

Data regarding father involvement in the program were obtained from the sign-in sheets completed by fathers when they participated in the classroom, attended meetings or workshops, met with teachers, accompanied children on trips and outings, or participated in other special activities that are related to the Head Start program. Fathers were asked to sign their names on the volunteer sheet and to indicate the start and ending time of their involvement. The total number of hours of participation was then calculated for each father for the school year.

The revised Parent Involvement in School scale (Taylor & Machida, 1994) was also administered to fathers and teachers at the end of the school year. Fathers were asked to report about their own involvement in Head Start. Teachers completed the Parent Involvement in School scale for fathers and mothers. This scale asks the respondent to estimate how often the parent volunteers in the classroom, responds to requests for information about the child, attends parent meetings, follows through with activities suggested by the teacher, tells the teacher when the child is sick, and tells the teacher about things that happen to the child outside of the program.

## Results

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### Father and father figure involvement in Head Start.

On the average, fathers and father figures in the study spent a total of 21.51 hours (SD= 82.41) participating in the Head Start program over the course of seven months (November through May). The number of hours of participation ranged from zero to 409 hours. Sixty-five fathers (48.1%) did not spend any

time participating in the Head Start program. Ten fathers (7.4%) spent from one to two hours participating in Head Start. Thirty-three fathers (24.4%) spent from three to 10 hours in the program. Three fathers (2%) spent from 11 to 21.51 hours (mean) in the program. Twenty-three fathers spent more than 21.51 hours participating in the program.

### Comparison of fathers with no involvement and fathers with any involvement

The next set of analyses compared fathers with no involvement and fathers with any involvement (i.e., more than zero hours) in Head Start. The no involvement and any involvement fathers were not significantly different on demographic variables. There were also no group differences on paternal nurturance, maternal Head Start involvement, father perceptions of child behavior, and teacher perceptions of child behavior. There was a significant treatment group difference. Fathers in the male involvement intervention program were far more likely to spend any time in Head Start than were fathers in the comparison group.

### Predictors of Head Start involvement

In the next set of analyses, Head Start involvement was treated as a continuous variable (i.e., number of hours of involvement over the course of the school year). The analyses showed that fathers and father figures were significantly more likely to spend time in Head Start if they had a son in the program than a daughter, if the father reported a higher level of nurturance toward his child, and if the father was in the intervention program. There was a trend for fathers to spend more time in Head Start if the mother was also highly involved in the program.

Fathers' self-perceived involvement in Head Start was significantly related to one variable—paternal nurturance. Teachers' rating of father involvement in Head Start were significantly predicted by teachers' perceptions of maternal involvement in the program, having a son rather than a daughter in the program, and having a child with fewer behavior problems.

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