

# Father Involvement



by Sarah Kaye

As they walk into the school building on a cool September morning, Stacey and her dad are holding hands and smiling. They enter room 103 and greet Mrs. Small, the Early Head Start teacher. Instead of saying goodbye at the door, Mrs. Small invites Stacey's dad in and actively engages him in some of Stacey's early morning activities.

This may not seem unusual, but for Stacey it's a big step. Stacey's parents never married but live in the same neighborhood, and Stacey's father hasn't always been active in her life. Today, with research showing the powerful, positive influence fathers have on their children, programs such as Early Head Start are active partners in engaging fathers. Stacey's dad is proud to be an active parent helping his daughter succeed.

Recognizing men's important role in their children's development, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Head Start Bureau began a fatherhood initiative in 1995 to actively engage fathers in their children's Head Start programs and to facilitate healthy interaction with their children. In *Building Block One* in its series *Building Blocks for Father Involvement*, the Head Start Bureau has compiled research on the importance of fathers in the healthy development of children. These studies demonstrate that children with involved fathers are more likely to enter school prepared to learn, have superior cognitive competencies, feel a greater sense of security, experience lower levels of teenage pregnancy and incarceration, and have better developed empathy than do children with absent fathers.

Yet, historically, the research has often ignored or minimized the importance of fathers. In 1990, researchers reviewing issues of five social science journals published over 27 years found fathers were frequently portrayed as missing, embattled, and perpetrators of maltreatment. Social research focusing on children and families usually includes children and their mothers or female caregivers, but fathers often aren't part of the equation.

A closer look at historical trends suggests such constraints on father involvement as:

- fathers' own fears of exposing their inadequacies,
- ambivalence of program staff about father involvement,
- gatekeeping by mothers, and
- inappropriate program design and delivery.

New research in Early Head Start is beginning to change the dialog around programs and practices for children and both of their parents. This research finds that fathers are involved, identifies barriers to their involvement, and provides recommendations to surmount those barriers.



## Father Involvement in Early Head Start

Through its Father Studies Work Group, HHS's Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project has been conducting research on the involvement of fathers in Early Head Start programming since 1999. In a sample of more than 200 participants, the work group found that 30.4% of nonresident fathers have participated in the Early Head Start program; of those, 9.5% are highly involved. Native Americans had the highest rates of attendance, followed by Hispanics, but overall there was no significant difference in level of involvement by fathers of different races.

Significant differences did exist, however, in the types of activities that attracted fathers of different cultural groups. For example:

- Native American fathers reported the highest levels of involvement in Early Head Start center committees and advisory boards, working in the classroom, bringing children and picking them up, attending home visits, and helping in maintaining center grounds.
- African American fathers reported the highest turnout for men's sporting events and parenting, employment training, and for education and literacy groups for men.
- Hispanic fathers were very involved in applying for the Early Head Start program, mixed gender education and literacy programs, and participating in parent-teacher conferences.
- White fathers had high participation rates in home visits and were actively engaged in goal setting for the entire family.

## Barriers

The Father Studies Work Group found the biggest barrier to involving fathers in programming is fathers' work schedules, followed by fathers not living with mothers and children, lack of male staff to whom fathers could relate, and disagreements between fathers and mothers.

According to the Head Start Bureau, other barriers stem from program design and philosophy, including concern that increased funding for providing services to men will drain limited fiscal resources, and a lack of experience and confidence among staff in understanding how to best work with fathers.

## Strategies for Increasing Father Involvement

Almost all Early Head Start programs invite fathers to participate. Most make efforts to interact with fathers who accompany mothers, and they ensure enrollment forms have a place for information about fathers.

Still, less than half of the programs complete a needs assessment for fathers and develop program policies with a clear expectation that fathers should and will participate. Less frequent strategies include recruiting fathers to work as mentors, recruiters, or group facilitators; including fathers in staff performance appraisals; and providing space for the exclusive use of fathers to meet together, listen to guest speakers, or talk with teachers.

Efforts to promote father involvement increase father participation. Head Start programs that incorporate fatherhood involvement strategies have significantly greater father participation—77% participate in programs with fatherhood initiatives, compared with 27% in standard programs.

Based on its experience serving fathers and families in a New York City Early Head Start program, Visiting Nurse Services of New York has developed a practice model for father engagement. The Father First Initiative in Far Rockaway, New York, is implementing this model and also offers counseling, home visitation, education and skills training, employment assistance, and linkages to Early Head Start and other community-based activities. The model includes six progressive steps to engaging fathers in early childhood programming:

- creating a culture of inclusion with father friendly environments;

- providing both passive (fathers come to the program on their own) and active (staff approach fathers where they gather) outreach;
- building relationships through collaboration, patience, and reflection;
- assessing needs and motivations to cultivate fathers' "buy-in";
- prioritizing goals from easier to harder; and
- providing diverse opportunities for engagement at many levels—individual, family, program, and community.

Nationally, Early Head Start programs have made a number of adjustments to become more father-friendly, including

- collecting enrollment information on fathers and including fathers by name on mailed materials;
- hiring a father involvement coordinator to take ownership of initiatives to engage fathers;
- training staff to work with fathers, and providing a toolbox of activities to implement in challenging situations that arise when working with fathers;
- using multiple recruitment methods to engage fathers—different cultural groups may respond to certain outreach methods over others, and incorporating knowledge about activities and methods to which specific fathers respond may improve father involvement;
- offering activities at convenient times and locations to accommodate fathers' schedules; and
- educating fathers on the importance of their roles in their children's development.

Research into the benefits of fatherhood on child development illuminates the importance of men in their children's lives and provides information on how programs can elicit father involvement. Understanding the factors relating to father involvement can help improve father involvement in other programs and create a nurturing environment for children.

*Sarah Kaye is a former intern with CWLA's Research to Practice initiative. For citations of the supporting research described here, see the online version of this article at [www.cwla.org/programs/r2p](http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p).*

## ONLINE RESOURCES

An overview of the Head Start Bureau's *Building Blocks for Father Involvement* series

[www.headstartinfo.org/publications/hsbulletin77/cont\\_77.htm](http://www.headstartinfo.org/publications/hsbulletin77/cont_77.htm).

*Building Block 1: Appreciating How Fathers Give Children a Head Start*

[www.headstartinfo.org/publications/building\\_blocks1.htm](http://www.headstartinfo.org/publications/building_blocks1.htm).

*Building Block 2: First Thoughts on Getting Fathers Involved in Head Start*

[www.headstartinfo.org/publications/building\\_blocks2.htm](http://www.headstartinfo.org/publications/building_blocks2.htm).