



Engaging Low-Income Fathers in Home Visiting

Approaches, Challenges, and Strategies

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Home visiting programs have a long history in the United States and abroad as a tool for supporting vulnerable families by encouraging positive parenting, promoting child development, and improving maternal and child health. Although programs have traditionally targeted pregnant women and mothers of young children, in the last several years interest has grown in expanding home visiting to more explicitly include fathers. This brief highlights the experiences of a select group of home visiting programs in the United States that are engaging low-income fathers, including the approaches programs use, the challenges they face in engaging fathers, and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges (see box 1 for a summary of study methods). This information has implications for home visiting programs that wish to extend their services to fathers, as well as other programs that serve fathers, such as healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs.

BOX 1

Study Methods

Findings are based on data collected from five home visiting programs in the United States in late 2014 and early 2015. Programs varied in home visiting model, demographics of the populations served, and geographic location. Field staff conducted a week-long site visit to each program and interviewed program directors and supervisors (18 total), home visitors (20 total), and participating fathers (40 total; 8 per site) and mothers (10 total; 2 per site matched with two of the interviewed fathers).

What Approaches Do Home Visiting Programs Use to Engage Fathers?

Since the practice of including fathers in home visiting is relatively new, little guidance exists on approaches to engaging them. As a result, programs vary in how they structure services for fathers. Study findings suggest that the five participating programs each used one of two approaches:

- **An integrated approach** in which the mother is the primary client but the home visitor integrates information and activities for fathers and modifies the curriculum to offer joint services to parents. Three sites used this approach. Staff typically recruited fathers through mothers; mothers were asked either when they joined the program or during an initial home visit whether they wanted fathers to attend visits. Staff estimated that fathers participated at least some of the time in approximately 10 to 25 percent of families served (about 30 to 60 fathers in each site). Although engaging fathers during home visits with mothers could reach a large number of fathers, only a small subset regularly attended home visits.
- **A father-centered approach** in which the father receives separate home visits from male mentors, with a curriculum that targets fathers' individual needs. Two sites used this approach. Program staff conducted home visits exclusively for fathers, with separate home visitors trained to work with men. In one site, standard maternal home visiting activities were supplemented with father-specific curricula; in the other site, the fatherhood coordinator designed his own program, borrowing from multiple curricula and tailoring it to the population he served. Both programs were relatively small; one served 15 fathers and the other served 40 fathers. Both programs hoped to increase enrollment over time but were limited by staff and resource constraints. The fathers who were enrolled were deeply engaged.

In both approaches, fathers developed strong personal relationships with their home visitors. Fathers in the integrated-approach programs often viewed their home visitors as helpful authority figures, and those in father-centered programs considered their home visitors mentors who helped guide them toward their personal goals. In each site, staff and fathers felt that the program's approach was engaging fathers effectively, suggesting that no single model of father engagement in home visiting exists. Several factors motivated the choice of approach, including the program's overall philosophy of family engagement, funding, and the needs of the target population.

All programs offered services for fathers beyond home visiting. Several sites had active peer support groups for fathers or had previously implemented such groups. Some sites organized family field trips to local sporting events, museums, and other locations and offered other activities for fathers to meet and support each other.



Challenges and Strategies for Engaging Fathers

Regardless of the approach used, all five participating programs encountered similar challenges in recruiting fathers and keeping them engaged. Five challenges in particular occurred across sites:

- scheduling;
- staff resistance;
- family resistance and maternal gatekeeping;
- fathers' perceptions of home visiting; and
- meeting the needs of particular populations, including nonresident, immigrant, and teen fathers.

We discuss each challenge and strategies the programs employed to overcome it. In some cases, the strategies varied by program approach; in other cases, strategies and challenges appeared universal.

Scheduling

Scheduling, and logistics more broadly, were the most common challenge encountered by all programs. Low-income parents often work nonstandard and shifting schedules and lack personal transportation or access to public transportation; this situation was particularly true of fathers in the programs. Program staff mentioned difficulties scheduling home visits and activities for seasonal workers, fathers working

second or third shifts (or both), fathers commuting long distances for work, fathers and mothers living separately, and fathers taking on irregular work to make ends meet. All these constraints made it very difficult for fathers to find time to engage in home visits or fatherhood activities and for program staff to keep fathers engaged once they were in the program.

Programs used different strategies to overcome scheduling problems. In integrated-approach programs, the most common strategy was for home visiting staff to attempt to schedule visits around both parents' schedules; in practice, because mothers were generally more available, home visitors tried to accommodate fathers' schedules so they could participate. In two programs, this accommodation meant making visits outside normal 9-to-5 hours; in the other integrated-approach program, it meant trying to find times within normal business hours when both fathers and mothers could attend. Staff in one program also offered nonresident fathers transportation to mothers' residences for home visits. Both these services were cited by fathers and staff as helping to get fathers engaged. One father, when asked what he liked most about the home visits, said, "It's convenient."

[We] try to work around them . . . if they're working, then I'll just schedule a visit when it works for them, when they can be there. We're going to figure it out and do it during their time.

—Home visitor

In father-centered programs, holding separate home visits with fathers reduced the scheduling burden because it was easier for home visitors to make and keep appointments. One father who had participated in a different home visiting program with his child's mother before switching to one of the father-centered programs spoke about the convenience of working around only his schedule: "I was always working double, two jobs, so I didn't have time to be there with [the mother]. Now it is easier for me." Home visitors also commented that they were able to shift appointments on short notice, helping to maintain engagement.

Programs that held group activities for fathers scheduled them outside 9-to-5 hours. These activities included field trips, peer support groups, and informational seminars for fathers or whole families to promote skill-building and healthy relationships. One staff member described a typical program schedule:

Our skills training is 85 percent of time on Saturday mornings at 9 a.m. Not too early. Then we're done by 11:30. We will serve breakfast and then serve a pretty heavy lunch. The other things could be—if we've got a special guest—it might be a Thursday or Friday evening, usually Friday evening after they're off work up to 9 p.m. If it's fishing, it's very early Saturday. We survey them on a quarterly basis to say, "Does this work for you?"



Staff Resistance

Multiple sites, predominantly those using integrated-approach programs, discussed staff resistance as an obstacle to recruiting and engaging fathers. This resistance stemmed from multiple causes. Some home visitors were concerned about domestic violence; one estimated that half the mothers in her caseload had experienced some form of abuse from their partners. Other home visitors, some of whom graduated from the home visiting program, remembered their own experiences of domestic violence and were wary of engaging fathers.

In integrated-approach programs, which depend on home visitors to engage with both mothers and fathers in home visits, the strategy for addressing these hesitations was staff training. As one program administrator explained,

We have had extensive training on addressing your own personal relationship with men or dads and so forth. The women doing case management have to come to terms with their own personal relationships. We have to depend on case managers engaging dads. We need them to understand to do it.

Programs experienced increases in the number of participating fathers after implementing additional staff training. Program leaders also made clear hiring decisions to overcome staff resistance.

If a person you're thinking of hiring is coming in with a bad experience with their partner, it has to be clear from the beginning that this is a program that works with moms and dads, and if the person doesn't have that comfort, it'll be difficult to be inclusive with the whole family.

Father-centered programs more easily avoided staff resistance by hiring separate staff, often men and fathers themselves, who were explicitly committed to engaging with fathers. One program director described hiring male home visitors as something that “just kind of fit.” These male home visitors and fatherhood coordinators typically had less internal resistance to working with fathers.

Family Resistance and Maternal Gatekeeping

The ability to overcome family resistance was also critical for home visitors, as some families put up barriers between home visitors and fathers. These barriers were particularly common among young parents still residing with their families; as one home visitor said, “We have family issues sometimes—if a family is in denial of the father, or they don't want him to be involved—there's a lot of blaming or guilt involved with the grandparents.”

At other times, the mothers were the gatekeepers, preventing access to the father either because they were no longer in a relationship, because they lacked confidence in the father's parenting ability and did not see the point of him receiving home visits, or because the mother wished to participate in home visits by herself. Staff saw overcoming this resistance, particularly if it stemmed from the mother, as key to keeping fathers engaged in parenting and in the program: “The mothers pretty much have the power . . . the mothers say you're in or you're out. So if they say the dad is in, he'll stay involved.”

In integrated-approach programs, home visitors overcame gatekeeping in multiple ways. Home visitors were trained to explain to mothers the role and importance of fathers in the family. They also tailored their interactions to accommodate the family's structure and culture. Especially with teen parents, some staff sought to establish rapport with the fathers' and mothers' parents to increase their access to young fathers. Additionally, program supervisors purposely matched home visitors to clients, because that relationship was foundational to engaging fathers. The integrated-approach programs had no male home visitors (though two of the three sites did have male fatherhood coordinators), but their staffs varied in background, experience, and other characteristics. For instance, one home visitor described how her older age and experience led some of her clients to view her as a mother figure and how respect for elders helped her engage mothers and fathers.

Father-centered programs were able to avoid some gatekeeping issues by providing separate home visits and group activities for fathers. Bypassing mothers made it easier to engage fathers. However, recruiting fathers still often required the approval of mothers and depended on them providing the father's name and contact information. Home visitors used similar strategies for recruiting fathers regardless of program approach. They were culturally sensitive and established rapport with families. In some cases, the program's fatherhood coordinator accompanied female home visitors on visits; while the home visitor met with the mother, the fatherhood coordinator tried to engage the father.

Fathers' Perceptions of Home Visiting

Even when challenges with scheduling, staff resistance, and family resistance could be overcome, the largest hurdle often remained: resistance by fathers themselves. Father resistance could take many forms, but most commonly it was explained as a perception that home visiting was not for men. This perception existed across programs regardless of their approach to engaging fathers. As one father in an integrated-approach program explained, “I just figured it was something to help [my girlfriend] and give her an idea of how it was gonna be.” There was a kernel of truth to this view; all programs, no matter the approach, were originally designed for mothers and only later expanded to include fathers. However, program staff worked hard to include fathers and to show them the benefits of participation. Although home visitors in integrated-approach programs closely adhered to established curricula, they nevertheless tailored their materials and activities to appeal to fathers.

Many home visitors spoke of fathers' preferences for hands-on activities. One home visitor in an integrated-approach program spoke of bringing such physical materials for fathers:

They like fun things—games. We learned that in training; that dads are often the fun parent. I brought paint one time and the mom didn't want it because of the mess but the dad really did. They like the fun, messy stuff more than the serious.

Another popular activity in one program was wearing the empathy belly, a padded device that mimics the weight and lack of balance of pregnancy. Fathers enjoyed wearing the belly and better understanding the physical effects their partners were going through.

Bringing something that's geared towards dad specifically is a great way to engage dads. Especially during pregnancy when the mom is the center of attention.
—Home visitor

Father-centered programs also tailored activities to appeal to fathers. In one program, home visitors video-recorded father-child interactions and played the recordings for fathers, giving them concrete evidence of their role in their child's life. Fathers liked this activity. Both father-centered programs used a mentorship model to directly address fathers' concerns and individual needs. In addition to providing information about parenting, these programs helped fathers search for jobs, learn anger management, and build healthy relationships with partners and peers. By individualizing services and focusing explicitly on the issues that mattered most to each father, programs alleviated fathers' concerns that home visiting was not for them.

Meeting the Needs of Particular Populations

Although certain challenges were found across all populations, staff specifically mentioned the difficulties of serving nonresident fathers, immigrants and other cultural groups, and teen fathers. Because of the way families were recruited, nonresident fathers were a small minority of fathers served. Fathers not living with mothers were less likely to be present in the home at the start of home visiting services, and fathers no longer in relationships or out of contact with mothers were difficult to reach. When couples who had enrolled in integrated-approach programs together later separated, home visitors encouraged the fathers to enroll in home visiting as primary clients of their own separate households. To reach nonresident fathers more broadly, programs tried to reach out to the community to increase awareness of services for fathers.

Staff reported that immigrant families must often navigate unfamiliar bureaucracies, usually in a new language and without any support. Undocumented immigrant fathers are wary of interactions with government services. On a more basic level, they may also have culturally specific views on the role of fathers. Regardless of their approach to engaging fathers, programs responded by tailoring their approaches to be culturally sensitive and to not impose one vision of fatherhood on all fathers. Spanish-speaking home visitors were assigned to Spanish-speaking families; older home visitors were assigned to families where respect for elders was more pronounced. Programs also trained their home visitors in immigration procedures to help connect immigrant fathers to community resources that could help them pursue employment opportunities and visas.

Young fathers were particularly challenging given their maturity level and their status as minors. Most still lived with their own parents and not with their children, and they needed parental consent to participate in the program. A companion brief, “Serving Young Fathers in Home Visiting Programs: Highlights from a Research Study,” provides more information on this population.

[Fathers] know their child the best. They know themselves the best; their past, the way they were raised. [The home visitor] comes in as a support for the father . . . with a philosophy to push enough to make the fathers really think about how to parent the child and what kind of parent they want to be. It's meeting fathers at their level and pulling out their strengths.

—Home visitor



Lessons Learned

Although firm conclusions cannot be drawn from visiting only five sites, some important lessons about engaging fathers in home visiting did emerge from interviews with program leaders, staff, and participating fathers and mothers. In particular, five themes for successfully working with fathers were consistent across the sites:

- **Demonstrate and embrace the importance of fathers.** Staff spoke of changing their organizations' culture to embrace fathers, drawing on lessons from other fatherhood programs. Fatherhood coordinators trained home visitors to engage more successfully with fathers. They reinforced the idea that fathers are not “add-ons” to the family. Program directors asked prospective home visitors about their comfort level working with fathers. Home visitors explained to mothers and fathers how children with engaged fathers perform better in school and have better outcomes than children without engaged fathers. Although fathers were generally already interested in being in their children's lives, home visitors showed them different ways they could be engaged, from changing diapers to reading stories.

- **Develop programs and services that target fathers.** Expanding home visiting to include fathers did not mean treating them identically to mothers. Even in integrated-approach programs, efforts were made to carefully target services to fathers through father-focused curricula and group activities for fathers outside the home. As one supervisor said, “I think [the most successful way to get dads involved is] combinations of home visits and groups.”
- **Individualize services.** One of the best ways home visitors found to engage fathers was to “meet fathers where they are.” Programs need to be able to offer necessary support, and fathers need to be able to ask for help with the issues that matter to them most. Offering support on issues important to fathers created trust and rapport between home visitors and fathers and helped keep fathers engaged. Individualizing services often meant providing job counseling and employment search help. These services appealed to fathers, especially those who were their family’s primary breadwinner.
- **Hire the right staff.** Programs attributed much of their success to their staff. Staff members formed deep and lasting relationships with their clients, and fathers turned to them when they had problems. According to program directors, there was no “best” type of home visitor. Rather, the most effective home visitors balanced a basic desire to help fathers with the ability to adapt to fathers’ needs and preferences. Some program staff felt that male home visitors or a male fatherhood coordinator was essential to their work, but some staff and even fathers felt that female home visitors also worked well with fathers when appropriately matched.
- **Be persistent yet patient.** The fathers interviewed for this study reported experiencing poverty, drug use, unstable homes, unemployment, and many other adverse circumstances. Many were initially suspicious of home visitors and unsure of the program’s benefits. Only through persistence and patience were home visitors able to build trust with fathers.

What triggered me to join [program] is that involving fathers in raising children is important. Society does not look at that role as important, but I like the challenge of that. Fathers are important.

—Participating father

Conclusion

Through flexible scheduling, tailored curricula and activities, and specially trained staff, the participating home visiting programs helped fathers build their skills and connect to needed supports and services. Across the study sites, fathers spoke warmly and enthusiastically of these programs. Their

participation helped them learn about themselves, their children, and their role in their children's lives. Further quantitative research on the most effective ways to serve fathers is needed, but this preliminary work indicates that home visiting could help fathers and families as a whole. Given the strong ties we found between home visiting services and other family activities, including father support groups, this work suggests that home visiting programs could partner with responsible fatherhood programs or other community programs serving fathers to share clients, boost recruitment efforts, and strategize service delivery options to meet clients' needs.

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