

Parent Involvement

A New Question for Head Start

Parent involvement in Head Start has been key since its inception in 1965. In contrast to other early childhood intervention programs in the early 1960s, the program broke ground by viewing parental participation as essential to both children's and families' growth and development. Research has demonstrated that greater parent involvement links to greater gains in children's cognitive, language, and socio-emotional growth.

In the 21st century, a new question arises for Head Start—"How can we make parent involvement happen?" instead of "Is parent involvement important or beneficial for children's development?"

A recent study by researchers at FPG Child Development Institute explores this question. Using objective and self-report measures of parent involvement from parents and teachers, the study determines to what extent and in what ways parents are involved in Head Start programs. The study also examines the relations between parent volunteering and family, teacher, and classroom characteristics.

Study Overview

Parents and teachers from four Head Start programs in a southeastern state participated. The programs represented the range of demographics found in the state and served about 1,600 low-income children and their families from urban, suburban, and rural areas. The racial ethnic distribution was more than 80% African American, with smaller percentages of White, Latino, and Asian families.

Of 780 parents who signed classroom volunteer logs, 127, or 16%, took part in interviews. Of 62 teachers, 59, or 95%, completed the teacher questionnaire; 35 teachers, or 56%, also participated in classroom observations.

Data on the frequency and types of parent involvement activities came from monthly classroom volunteer logs. The monthly log included the type of volunteer (e.g., parent, relative, community member), the number of

times volunteered, the type of activity performed (e.g., helping in the classroom, going on a field trip, attending a parent meeting, preparing materials at home), and time spent at each activity.

One hundred twenty-seven parents were interviewed to gather information about parent characteristics. Data included family demographic information, parent satisfaction with their child's Head Start program (e.g., helpfulness in child growth and development, preparation for school, and family support), barriers to parent involvement (e.g., need for child care, interference with work or school schedules, need for transportation), parents' activities with their child at home (e.g., reading at home, telling stories, playing games, going to the library, visiting a zoo or aquarium, going to a park or to the movies, attending a community event), and parent reports of volunteer activities at Head Start (e.g., helping out in the classroom, going on field trips, attending meetings and events, preparing materials).

A teacher questionnaire was used to examine associations between teacher characteristics and parent volunteering. Teachers answered such questions as the percentage of parents who are interested in their child's performance, are easily involved in Head Start, able to help their child learn, and work with their child on learning activities at home. The questionnaire also reported on parents' participation in Head Start activities (e.g., open house, helping in the classroom, parent-teacher conferences, home visits).

The *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale* was used to examine the connection between classroom quality and parent volunteering. It measures these major areas: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff.

A Portrait of Parent Involvement

Parents made up 76% of the total number of volunteers, with 59% volunteering only one or two times per year, 9% three times, and 32% four or more times. Helping out in the classroom (35%) was the most frequent activity followed by attending parent meetings and classroom meetings (24%). Other activities included assisting on field trips (14%) and volunteering from home (12%). The remaining 15% of volunteer work entailed bus monitoring, fund-raising, and helping out at festivals and special events.

Analysis of the volunteer logs and parent interviews revealed that employed parents were less likely to volunteer in Head Start activities. Parents who reported doing more activities with their children at home tended to be more involved in their child's Head Start program.

There were more total volunteer hours in classrooms where teachers had more years of experience in Head Start. Classrooms with a larger number of different volunteers had a larger proportion return to volunteer again. Higher quality classrooms had a larger number of different volunteers.

This *Snapshot* is based on the following article: Castro, D. C., Bryant, D. M., Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., & Skinner, M. L. (2004). Parent involvement in Head Start programs: The role of parent, teacher, and classroom characteristics. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 19 (3), 413-430.

Progress and Challenges in Parent Participation

Parent volunteering in Head Start is up. A 1975 study found that 35% of the parents accounted for 71% of the time volunteered in their Head Start programs. The current study shows that 47% of parents accounted for 53% of the total number of volunteer activities. Results suggest that attendance at parent meetings may have increased in the past decade—an indicator of increased family involvement and more opportunity for family and staff communication.

The study indicates that working parents volunteer less, given their lack of discretionary time, which is consistent with other research. As more low-income parents have entered the workforce, Head Start programs have needed to find ways to accommodate their schedules. Expanding parents' volunteering from home would mean broadening the definition of parent involvement as well as home-based activities that support their child's development and education.

What draws parents into a classroom? Of teacher and classroom characteristics examined, classroom quality was the strongest predictor of parent involvement. This may indicate that high quality classrooms have the conditions that promote parent volunteering.

Head Start is not the only childhood program to struggle with parent involvement, especially parents who work. The study suggests the need to disseminate effective strategies on how to coordinate with parents. Holding events

that involve the whole family—targeting children, fathers, and grandfathers—may create more enthusiasm for an after-work activity. Parents involved in planning and conducting activities may have more interest. Because volunteering is positively associated with parental involvement in home learning activities, staff may be motivated to more effectively involve parents in volunteering.

Experienced teachers garnered more volunteer hours and more returning volunteers. Mentoring other teachers about their parent involvement practices may prove a strategy to increase parent involvement in early childhood programs.

Future Research

This study raises more questions for further consideration:

- What specific activities in the classroom most engage parents?
- Do teachers use this time to help parents learn new skills?
- How do parents perceive their classroom volunteering experience?
- How do parent volunteers and teaching staff interact?
- How do volunteers and children interact?
- How do teachers successfully involve parents in their classrooms?

Answering these questions may prove useful in designing strategies to engage parents in volunteering for Head Start or similar early childhood programs. ■

Snapshots are summaries of research articles, books and other publications by researchers at the FPG Child Development Institute at UNC-Chapel Hill. Permission is granted to reprint this article if you acknowledge FPG and the authors of the article on which this *Snapshot* is based. For more information, call the FPG Publications Office at 919-966-4221 or email <fpgpublications@unc.edu>. Visit us at <www.fpg.unc.edu>.



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