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TRENDS IN FAMILY PROGRAMS AND POLICY

Creating Paths to Father Involvement: Lessons from Early Head Start

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This brief is based on Mathematica's evaluation of the Early Head Start Fatherhood Demonstration. In February 2001, the Administration on Children, Youth and Families and the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services partnered to fund 21 Early Head Start fatherhood demonstration projects. Grantees were selected through a competitive process and funded for three years to create and implement innovative practices to increase the involvement of fathers in Early Head Start and in the lives of their children. Grantees were expected to establish partnerships with local OCSEs and other organizations to deliver services that encourage responsible parenting. Our study examined project implementation and participant experiences. It also identified lessons relevant to designing, operating, and sustaining fatherhood initiatives that can guide policymakers and practitioners as they undertake new efforts to increase fathers' involvement in Head Start and other programs.

Focusing on Fathers

A growing body of research shows that father involvement enhances children's well-being. Children with involved fathers exhibit greater school readiness, increased cognitive development, higher levels of empathy, and other positive characteristics (Administration for Children and Families 2004). These findings have sparked interest in identifying

effective strategies for engaging fathers in early childhood programs.

Early Head Start, created in 1995, provides services to low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers up to age three. The program aims to promote prenatal health, enhance children's development, and strengthen families. Findings from Mathematica's national evaluation of Early Head Start indicated that although a minority of fathers participated in program activities, the program had positive impacts on fathers' parenting behavior and interactions with their children (Administration for Children and Families 2002).

Building on these findings, the Early Head Start Fatherhood Demonstration sought to inform both practitioners and policymakers about promising strategies for enhancing father involvement in the program. Mathematica examined a variety of operational issues related to increasing father involvement. These issues encompass staffing fatherhood initiatives, training staff on father involvement, engaging and serving fathers, working with child support agencies, and sustaining initiatives.

Key Lessons for Practitioners

Lessons that may be useful to programs developing similar initiatives in the future include the following:

- **Most programs used a fatherhood staffing structure that included a coordinator and one or more specialists.** This structure appeared to allocate responsibilities such as program development, program management, and direct service provision effectively. Fatherhood staff that were integrated into an existing work group, communicated frequently with other staff, or had an "open-door policy" for questions from staff appeared better able to coordinate their efforts with other Early Head Start services.

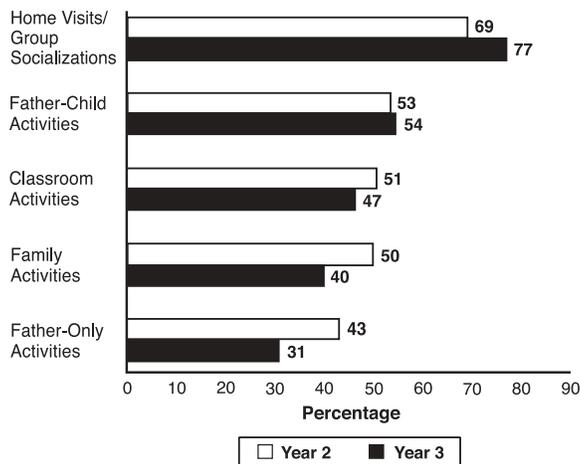
Front-line staff delivering program services reported that the following strategies helped get fathers involved:

- Most programs invited fathers to all aspects of Early Head Start. Enrollment sessions provided an important opportunity to gather fathers' contact information and highlight services for fathers and their families.
- All Early Head Start staff members were encouraged to engage fathers in conversation and make special efforts to invite them to participate in the classroom, home visits, and program events. These one-on-one contacts seemed to be more effective in recruiting fathers than mailing them invitations to attend events. Programs also communicated the importance of father involvement to children's mothers, so that they would help contact fathers and encourage them to participate.
- Displaying positive images of men in classrooms and ensuring that male staff and fathers were present in reception areas helped convey that Early Head Start is a program for fathers, not just mothers and children.

- **Important qualifications for fatherhood staff included professional experience and an ability to connect with fathers on a personal level.** The skills and qualifications of fatherhood staff varied across programs, but training in social work or experience in community organizing were common. Early Head Start directors also noted that fatherhood staff needed a personality that would enable them to "break through" to fathers and establish trust. Focus groups with fathers revealed that many appreciated the presence of men among the predominantly female Early Head Start staff. Furthermore, fathers felt more comfortable discussing personal matters with male staff. Finding and retaining qualified personnel for fatherhood positions was challenging, however—during the demonstration period, more than half the programs had turnover in their lead father involvement position.

- **Staff training was key to father involvement.** Staff training was cited as the most successful strategy in making a program father-friendly. Training sessions often focused on staff attitudes toward involving men in the program. During our interviews, many programs reported that some female staff members had had negative personal experiences with men, which sometimes affected their willingness to engage fathers in the program. According to fatherhood staff and program directors, internal staff training sessions that addressed these personal experiences and highlighted the important role fathers play in their child's well-being helped make female staff more receptive to including men.
- **Getting and keeping fathers involved was a significant challenge.** Key barriers to getting fathers involved were (1) their work schedules, (2) some mothers' reluctance to have fathers participate, and (3) a general perception that Early Head Start is for women and children only. Nevertheless, programs identified useful strategies for reaching out to fathers (see box at left).
- **Fathers participated most in activities that included their children.** Many fathers took part in some Early Head Start activities. Of those identified as involved in their children's lives, about 70 percent participated in at least one activity in a six-month period during the second year of the demonstration; about 67 percent participated in a six-month period during the third year. Child development services, such as home visits and group socializations, drew the largest number (Figure 1). Father-child and family activities, such as working on craft projects, reading to children, and inexpensive experiences that families could replicate on their own, like feeding birds or flying kites, were also popular. Most programs offered peer support for fathers; in addition, activities such as sporting events and camping trips allowed staff and fathers to get to know each other and develop trust. However, participation in father-only activities declined over time. Among fathers who had participated in at least one Early Head Start activity, 43 percent took advantage of father-only activities in the second year, but only 31 percent did so in the third year. This pattern may have reflected fathers' preference for activities that included their children and families, and some programs emphasized these opportunities more as time went on. Six programs focused heavily

Figure 1: Father Participation in Selected Activities



Note: Figures are for fathers who participated in at least one activity in the preceding six months.

Source: Early Head Start Fatherhood Demonstration.

on linking fathers to employment and training services to increase their ability to support their children financially.

- Partnerships with OCSEs often involved sharing general information about child support.** By the end of the third year of the demonstration, 17 of the 21 programs had collaborated with their local OCSE. Most of these efforts focused on disseminating information about child support to staff and families, usually through workshops or printed materials. Three programs worked with intermediaries to provide specialized services for individual fathers, such as helping to modify child support orders, adjust large unpaid balances, or reinstate suspended driver licenses. However, many of these partnerships involved challenges related to differences in agency missions, fathers' hostility toward child support agencies, and confidentiality protections that could make it difficult to address individual problems.
- Sustaining initiatives will require further work.** Continuing fatherhood services after the end of the grant period was a major concern. Two-thirds of the programs had concrete plans for sustaining fatherhood staff by maintaining their current positions or shifting them into other Early Head Start roles in which they would continue to spend some time serving fathers. About half the programs sought new funding for fatherhood services, but at the time of our final site visits, most had not been successful. In response, some directors tapped

Mathematica used three data sources to track the progress of the 21 demonstration programs:

- Site visits.** We visited all 21 grantees after the first and second years of implementation and then made a final visit to a subset of 9 programs at the end of three years. The research team interviewed Early Head Start fathers and mothers, program staff, and local OCSE staff.
- Staff survey.** During the second and third years of the demonstration, we asked program staff to complete a survey on strategies for involving fathers. The survey was modeled on an instrument used in a previous study of Early Head Start practitioners.
- Father information forms.** During the second and third years of the demonstration, program staff provided data on father involvement for each child enrolled in Early Head Start. For children with involved fathers, we asked about fathers' characteristics and program participation. According to data on 1,743 children in the demonstration's second year and on 1,889 children in the third year, 79 percent of children had an involved father in the second year and 73 percent in the third year.

their existing Early Head Start budgets to preserve fatherhood services. Factors that influenced programs' ability to maintain services for fathers included strong administrative leadership and support, innovative grant seeking, resourceful budgeting, effective staff collaboration, enthusiasm for involving fathers, and a structured planning process to lay the foundation for the future.

Results for Programs and Families

Although launching and maintaining services for fathers was challenging for some programs, nearly all viewed themselves as more father-friendly by the end of the study. In staff surveys, Early Head Start directors were asked to rate their programs' stage of

father-friendliness using a five-point scale (from “pre-stage” to “very mature”). By the end of the third year, nearly all directors considered their programs to be at a mature or very mature stage, meaning that many changes had occurred to make the programs father-friendly, many resident and nonresident fathers were involved, and the programs offered a variety of father-involvement activities.

In more than three-quarters of the programs, staff reported that their increased awareness about how to involve fathers was a major accomplishment of the demonstration. Staff in most programs also believed the demonstration had helped increase the number of fathers participating in Early Head Start activities, including core services such as home visits and group socializations. In about half the programs, staff and parents noted that fathers gained knowledge of child development and became more confident with their children. Staff also felt that children benefited from having more opportunities to interact with their fathers and other male role models.

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