

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Time Management and Home-Based Parent Involvement in Head Start Families

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Head Start programs encourage parents' involvement in children's learning and development. To help accomplish this objective, teachers in one program sent a developmentally appropriate activity, linked to the classroom curriculum, home each week for parents and children to do together. This study used focus groups to examine how parents made the time to complete these "homework" activities and the obstacles they faced in doing so.

Parents ($n = 22$) reported using a variety of time management strategies and supports, described the obstacles they faced in managing time, and discussed the management of the homework activities themselves. Although the results are limited by sample size and characteristics, this study adds to the very limited knowledge about time management strategies in low-income families. Asking parents how they make time to be involved with their children may result in information that can be shared with other families struggling with this issue.

One of the broadest and most commonly cited definitions of parent involvement comes from Maccoby and Martin (1983) who used the term to describe when a someone is "committed to his or her role as a parent and to the fostering of optimal child development" (p.48). The term has been defined in numerous specific ways, particularly as it relates to children's cognitive development and school performance (Beecher & Makin, 2002; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Hindman, Connor, Jewkes, & Morrison, 2008; Hoover- Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005), and has been examined in school, home, and community settings using parent reports, and in some cases, observations (e.g., Manz, Fantuzzo, & Power, 2004; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007).

This study specifically focuses on home-based parent involvement which can subdivide into two categories: (a) parent-child activities that promote children's intellectual development through non-school related activities, and (b) parent-child activities associated specifically with children's early education experiences and curriculum-based concepts. The former type supports children's cognitive development through activities such as reading the newspaper with children

and taking them to the library (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). The latter form of parent involvement focuses on the ways in which parents support school-related educational endeavors such as helping children with homework and school projects (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack 2007). Previous research has found positive relationships between this form of home-based parent involvement and positive outcomes for young children such as increased motivation to learn and task engagement, as well as increased literacy, language, and numeracy skills (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Miller-Johnson, 2000; Fantuzzo, et al., 2004; Senechal & Lefevre, 2002).

Although home-based parent involvement has been identified as one of the mechanisms through which society can attempt to close the achievement gap that exists between socioeconomic strata (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), it has been found that low-income parents are less likely to be involved in young children's learning within the home than middle-class parents (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Lareau, 1987). However, in low-income households, home-based parent involvement activities, such as shared book reading interactions, have been positively correlated with young children's language and comprehension scores (Raikes, Pan, Luze, Tamis-LeMonda, Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Fantuzzo, et al. (2004) found a positive relationship between the Family Involvement Questionnaire's sub-scale measure of home-based parent involvement (e.g., reviews child's work, reads with child, asks child about school-day, helps with homework) and 130 preschoolers' learning motivation, task persistence, and attitude toward learning (as measured by teacher report), as well as receptive vocabulary skills. A negative relationship between home-based parent involvement and high-risk preschoolers' conduct problems, hyperactivity, and inattention was also noted in Fantuzzo's study.

Because it appears that home-based parent involvement can be an important factor in the development of academic skills in low-income children, some interventions have been developed to encourage it. One example is the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPPY) a privately-funded, non-profit, home-based intervention program that, over the course of two years, attempts to increase typically developing, low-income preschoolers' school readiness through daily lessons conducted by their parents. Parents receive support for their home-based involvement through group meetings and home visits (Baker, Piotrkowski, Brooks-Gunn, 1999). On a bi-monthly schedule, trained home visitors engage parents in role play activities for 30-60 minutes educating them about effective parenting practices which may be useful during home-based parent involvement activities with their children. On alternating weeks, parents attend meetings with other HIPPPY parents and program coordinators.

Baker, Piotrkowski, and Brooks-Gunn (1998) investigated the effectiveness of the HIPPPY program using a longitudinal randomized experimental study. Two cohorts (each with an experimental and control group) of low-income pre-kindergarten and kindergarten-age children ($n = 182$), were assessed at three time points (baseline, end of program, and one year after involvement in the program) via teacher ratings, review of school records, and cognitive assessments. Children in cohort one had significantly higher scores on their cognitive assessments, were rated by teachers as better adapted to the classroom, and had significantly higher reading scores at one year follow-up than the control group. However, none of the findings were replicated in cohort two. Baker, et al. (1999) interpreted this non-replication as a function of differential parent participation between the two cohorts. Qualitative interviews with program staff indicated that there was a wide range of parent involvement, even among parents who remained in the program for two years. Thus, while some parents may have enjoyed the

support of the group meetings, it appears that they may have faced significant barriers to being able to conduct the activities with their children.

Barriers to Engagement in Home-Based Parent Involvement Activities

Although programs like HIPPO can be helpful for some families, it is important to recognize that others may not benefit because they are unwilling or unable to participate. Some low-income parents may be less likely to engage in home-based parent involvement, perhaps due in part to poor personal educational experiences and/or a low sense of parenting efficacy (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jones, 2001). For example, parents with lower educational attainment are less likely to engage in book reading. (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001; Lareau, 2000). Lareau's (2003) ethnographic study of low-income families with young children indicated that parents often demonstrate a lack of confidence when communicating with children's teachers. This attitude may transfer to the home environment where they may not feel as though intervening in their child's education is appropriate because it may contradict the authority of the child's teacher (Lareau, 2003). This assertion was supported by Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, and Eggers-Pierola (1995) who found that Latino parents were less likely to become involved in children's education for this reason.

Some low-income families may also be contending with circumstances that make it exceedingly difficult to do home-based parent involvement activities. These concerns can include problems with procuring basic necessities like shelter, power, and/or food, or contending with substance abuse and neighborhood violence. There are other situations that impose increased demands on the family system. For example, when a family is going through a divorce, and transitory living situations persist, it is likely that household routines will be affected, with responsibilities shifting amongst family members and taxing the amount of time available to spend on home-based parent involvement activities.

Issues related to the availability of time can be predominant obstacles to parent involvement. Two such issues are parents' work schedules (Heymann & Earle, 2001) and long work-to-home commutes (Weiss, Mayer, Kreider, Vaughan, Dearing, Hencke, et al., 2003). The common theme in these studies is that parents lack time to devote to active engagement in their children's lives.

The relationship between time demands and home-based parent involvement was investigated by Weiss, et al. (2003) in a mixed-methods ethnographic study of the lives of 20 children from their kindergarten through second-grade years. Their study also included a larger sample of 390 families, with whom interviews were conducted in the child's kindergarten year. Weiss, et al. found that compared with mothers who did not work outside of the home, mothers who attended school full-time and/or worked outside of the home were less involved in their children's schooling. Weiss et al. also noted that a significant obstacle to being involved in children's schooling was the amount of time mothers spent at work.

Barriers to engagement in home-based parent involvement exist across all socioeconomic strata. For example, an exploratory study conducted by Dolezal, Nordquist, and Twardosz (2009) indicated that variables such as parent work hours, a predictable family schedule, and help from people outside of the family may contribute to the amount of time middle-income parents can spend reading to their children. For low-income families, coping with specific

barriers may be particularly problematic as a result of having fewer and less reliable resources than middle- and high-income families.

INVESTIGATING TIME MANAGEMENT

The idea that time management strategies may be particularly salient for Head Start families is rooted in previous work noting that low-income households tend to have less stable and consistent resources and routines than middle- and high-income households (Petrill, Pike, Price, & Plomin, 2004; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Reiser, 2007). Roy, Tubbs, and Burton (2004) noted that it may be necessary to view the concept of time use in low-income families in a different manner than previously because those families often have complicated lives with few resources to help manage and organize time. Given the income inequality that exists at the present time in the United States, a greater number of families are probably experiencing these time barriers, making it increasingly difficult for them to engage in activities with their children (Duncan & Murnane, 2011).

Roy, et al. (2004) attempted to address this issue by examining how low-income mothers spend their time and the ways in which they access and use supports to meet the demand for their time. They conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study of 75 low-income mothers of children ranging in age from 18-48 months. They found that 50% of the mothers in their study spent between two and six hours per day with their child(ren). Contributing factors that explain their findings include that (a) nearly half of the mothers in their study worked second- or third-shift jobs and (b) those same mothers often spent between two to five hours commuting to and from work. Roy, et al. also found that when parents managed their time they did so by “staggering obligations, expanding resources, and decreasing obligations” (p. 174). Parents indicated that being able to engage in such strategies was contingent upon reliable and consistent resources such as transportation and child care.

As Roy et al. (2004) and others have noted, time is a barrier to home-based parent involvement for some families. Previously, studies examined the ways in which families use their time (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997; Bryant & Zick, 1996; Hamermesh, Frazis, & Stewart, 2005), such as proportion spent watching television and time commuting to and from work. However, those studies did not describe how families *manage* their time, information that may be beneficial when trying to increase parent involvement in low-income families.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of the present exploratory study is to add to the very sparse literature on time management in low-income families by examining the strategies of a small number of Head Start families relative to home-based parent involvement. This study investigates this issue as it relates specifically to family participation in a “homework” activity program connected with their children’s Head Start classrooms. Feedback from many parents about this program indicated that finding the time to do the activities was difficult and often a barrier to their completion. The intention of this study is to explore, through focus group methodology, the ways in which parents managed time to engage in these “homework activities” with their children, and the difficulties involved in doing so.

METHODS

Background and Setting

This study was conducted in close partnership with the Knoxville/Knox County Head Start (KKCHS) program. KKCHS serves approximately 925 low-income families of young children (36-48 months) across 44 classrooms in six centers. KKCHS offers full- and part-day high quality early education, transportation services, as well as healthcare and developmental screenings for all children. Each family is visited at home by a Head Start representative at least once per year and is encouraged to support the accomplishment of agreed upon goals, such as reading to their children or completing their GED. Parents have opportunities to become involved with the KKCHS program by volunteering in the classroom and at the administrative level. KKCHS supports parenting education by offering information about positive parenting practices and children's health and well-being during monthly group parent meetings.

As an additional aspect of its efforts to encourage home-based parent involvement and empower parents in their role as their children's first teacher, KKCHS implemented a program of developmentally appropriate and cognitively stimulating activities, connected with the classroom curriculum, that were also designed to be fun and promote positive parent-child interactions. The activities were called "homework" because it was thought that this would be a familiar term for parents, particularly those with older children. Teachers sent home one activity per week. Parents were asked to complete the "homework" with their children within a week and return the product to the classroom teacher. Examples of activities were having parents and children engage in a scavenger hunt around the house to identify items starting with the letter B; having parents and children compare their height by measuring it with household objects; and having parents and children create a booklet depicting the child's favorite activities (Homework activity example included below).



Homework - Fall

Date: _____



Child's Name: _____ Teacher's Name: _____

Assignment:

Go outside in your yard, neighborhood, or a park with your child, and collect a variety of interesting leaves. Talk about what happens in the fall (leaves change, it gets cooler, it gets dark earlier, etc.). Bring the leaves home and see how many ways you can sort them (by kind of leaf, color, size, pointed edges or round edges, etc.). Choose 5 leaves that are different sizes and have your child line them up on a table from smallest to biggest and biggest to smallest. Mix all the leaves together and ask your child to find one large leaf, 2 red leaves, 3 yellow leaves, 4 leaves with pointed edges, etc.

Have your child pick a few of the most beautiful or interesting leaves and bring them to school by Friday to share with the class in the science center.

What your child will learn from this assignment:

Your child will begin to understand about changing seasons and what happens in the fall. He/she will continue to learn math concepts involving counting, sorting, classifying, and color recognition. He/she will also begin to learn the concept of sequencing (putting things in order by size). By doing this assignment together with you, your child will learn that it is interesting and important to learn about the world around us.

Comments:

Child's Signature

Parent's Signature

KCHS assessed parent opinions of the homework activities program at the end of the first year of implementation and found that parents may have been more likely to participate in the program if they had the materials required to complete the activities available to them at no cost. In response, KKCHS provided a backpack filled with the necessary materials to each family as they began their second year of implementation. However, questions remained about the factors responsible for different levels of parent participation within and across classrooms, and parent perceptions about the integration of their completed activities into their child's curriculum. To gather more information about these issues, written surveys were distributed at a monthly parent meeting to 217 families. One of the primary questions was, "What makes it hard? [to complete the homework activities]. The most frequent response was that parents were too busy or did not have enough time. This response was reiterated by the classroom teachers who were also asked for their opinions about possible reasons for differing levels of parent involvement in the programs.

Despite this lack of time, nearly all of the surveyed parents indicated that they enjoyed doing the homework, and most parents thought that two important aspects of completing the activities were that their child gains "experience and knowledge about what homework is" and "valuable bonding time together". Thus, based on responses from parents and teachers, it appeared that one of the most likely barriers to completing the homework activities was a lack of available time. That finding caused us to wonder about how the parents who completed all or most of the activities with their children managed their time in order to do so, and the obstacles that some families faced that made it very difficult or impossible to engage with their children in this manner.

Recruitment and Participant Selection Process

Families were identified as belonging to either a high- (≥ 10 returned activities), moderate- (6-9 returned activities), or low-homework completion group (1-5 returned activities) based on the number of returned homework activities documented by teachers over a 16-week period. Completion of at least one homework activity was required because of the need to be able to respond to questions about the program. All parents were blind to the fact that they were grouped according to the number of completed and returned homework activities. Only families from the high- and low-homework completion groups were included in this study. High- versus low-homework completion rate group cut-offs were determined by looking for meaningful and natural patterns in the homework response rates tracked by classroom teachers. This method was used to facilitate comparison between extremes given that we were originally looking for differences in time management strategies between groups.

There were 451 potential participants (low homework completion group = 311, high homework completion group = 140). Parents were excluded if their child transferred classrooms during the homework tracking period or stopped attending KKCHS ($n = 182$). At the time of their transfer or drop, 82.6% of those excluded would have been categorized as part of the low-homework completion group. Parents identified by the program's English Language Coordinator as unable to proficiently speak and understand the English language were also excluded ($n = 33$) due to difficulties with participation in an informal focus group. This left a final sample of 236 potential participants. These parents were evenly distributed across both the high- and low- homework completion groups.

Families first learned about the study through announcements made by parent liaisons at a monthly meeting for all parents that occurred at all six centers of the KKCHS program. During one of the monthly meetings a parent liaison (who was informed about the study and equipped with a script and talking points) explained the purpose of the study to other parents present at the meeting. Within two weeks of that announcement, classroom teachers gave potential participants a recruitment letter explaining the study and inviting the parents to participate. Interested parents returned completed forms with their contact information in order to schedule and confirm their focus group attendance.

Participant Characteristics. Participants included in this study were the primary legal caregivers (referred to throughout as ‘parent(s)’) of a child enrolled in KKCHS. The mean age of children in this study was 59.87 (range: 48-67) months. The mean parent age across all focus groups was 33.18 years (range: 21-67). Of the parents who participated in the study, 68.2% ($n = 15$) were the child’s biological mother, 9.1% ($n = 2$) were biological fathers, 18.2% ($n = 4$) were biological grandmothers, and 4.5% ($n = 1$) was a biological grandfather. Most parents, 59.1%, ($n = 13$) were from a two-parent household. Of the participating caregivers, 48% were White, 43% Black/African American, and 9% were of “other” ethnic heritage.

Focus Group Procedures and Questions

Separate focus groups were conducted for the high- and low-homework completion rate groups. The reason for conducting separate and homogenous focus groups was to encourage parents to respond in a manner that was most representative of their experiences. This method is supported by Morgan (1997), who stated that the homogeneity resulting from such segmentation “allows for more free-flowing conversations among participants within groups, but also facilitates analyses that examine differences in perspective between groups” (p. 35).

A total of 18 high-homework completion group parents participated in three focus groups (n per group: 7/8/3) and four low-homework completion group parents participated in two focus groups (n per group: 2/2). Reasons parents gave for not being able to attend a focus group after agreeing to do so were tracked. For the high group reasons included parent ($n = 2$) or child ($n = 5$) illness and unexpected work obligations ($n = 1$). For the low group, anxiety/stress over lack of basic utilities ($n = 1$), mechanical car problems ($n = 1$), child illness ($n = 1$), and suspected domestic dispute ($n = 1$), precluded participation.

Krueger and Casey (2000) stated that focus group questions should be pilot tested, then refined in accordance with suggestions. Accordingly, focus group questions and procedures were pilot-tested with four non-Head Start affiliated mothers who had at least one child between the ages of 3-5 years. The only suggested alteration was to change the wording in the first question from “recall” to “think about” and use follow-up prompts to support parents’ reflective recall.

The first author and a trained assistant moderator conducted each focus group in a multipurpose room at one of the KKCHS centers. Following introductions and consent procedures, the following questions were posed to parents one at a time. Following each question was a group discussion during which parents provided elaborative responses.

1. What was doing that activity with your child like? (this question was asked following a reflective recall of a time that parents had completed one of the homework activities with his or her child)
2. What helps you find the time to do the homework activities with your child?
3. What makes it difficult to do the homework activities with your child?
4. Does anyone else in your child's life help him or her complete the homework activities?
5. Is there anything that you would like Head Start to know about family life and the things that either help you or make it difficult to do the homework activities?

On average, focus groups with seven or more people lasted for 75 minutes. Focus groups with three or fewer people lasted approximately 50 minutes. The difference in the amount of time spent with larger versus smaller groups was a function of the volume of comments made per person, per group. Overall, parents contributed to conversations fairly equally. In a few circumstances specific parents who had not yet contributed unique comments to the conversation were prompted and encouraged to contribute by the first author, all offered their insights at that point.

ANALYSIS

Focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word[®]. Demographic data was entered into a SPSS database and analyzed using the software's descriptive analysis tools. In accordance with Bogdan and Biklen (2007), transcripts were read by the first author three times. The first two readings were to gain an overall sense of focus group and nature of the issues that parents discussed. During the third reading, the constant comparison method was used to create themes of participant responses to each question.

Originally, a secondary goal of this study was to provide some examples of differences in time management strategies that might emerge between parents in the high- and low-homework completion groups. However, given the very low number of parents from the low-homework completion group who attended the focus groups, this question could not be addressed, thus parent comments from all focus groups were combined.

Validation Strategies

In an effort to validate participants' comments the first author corroborated themes with supportive quotes provided by parents during the focus groups. Second, a peer-review of the themes was conducted with skilled and objective peers involved in the Interdisciplinary Phenomenology Colloquy (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) at a large southeastern accredited university. Their role was to provide an external check of methods and interpretations to ensure that researcher bias was minimized and that consistency in the methods and analyses was maintained.

The third form of validation was a member check conducted with one parent that participated in each focus group. Each parent was asked whether he/she thought the identified

themes were representative of the focus group discussion he/she participated in, and of theirs and other Head Start parents’ experiences in general. All of the parents ($n = 5$) included in the member check agreed with the way the data were interpreted. None offered additional comments or thought anything needed to be changed.

RESULTS

Three primary categories emerged from analyses: time management strategies and supports, time management obstacles, and homework activity management. Sub-themes and parents’ quotes are included to support each category. It is best to think of each category not as identical responses grouped into a homogenous whole, but rather as a continuum along which perspectives differ, yet still relate to the overall theme.

Table 1
Parent focus groups’ primary categories and sub-themes

Time Management Strategies and Supports	Time Management Obstacles	Homework Activity Management
organizational aids	lacked of transportation	homework preparation
routines	children’s behavior	engagement strategies
flexible time perspective	household responsibilities	inclusion of siblings
child’s mood	appointments	physical environment
family support	caring for others	
	work schedule	
	high parental stress	

Time Management Strategies and Supports

The most prominent theme (mentioned by 68.1% of parents) relating to time management strategies was the utilization of organizational aids such as planners, calendars, and/ or a specific storage location for the homework activity sheet.

Well, I even put homework on the calendar. On my front door...my calendar is magnetic and it’s on my front door, okay. And just like with the homework, so I can remember to give it to ‘em, just like the note, we just got something just yesterday that we need to return.

Many parents (54.5%) also explained that having a standard routine reduced having to figure out when to find time each week and helped their children understand that the activities were important.

And I mean we do it right when he comes in from school. Like he comes in, because I work part-time at night three days a week. So as soon as he comes in and he kinda settles down we do it right then. We set a certain time.

Thursdays we'd get together and we'd work on her homework after breakfast and after she'd got herself ready to do whatever and we'd sit down and do some homework. And that worked out pretty well for us.

Other parents explained that they did not have a specific routine regarding the homework activities. These parents embraced a flexible perspective about time that allowed them to capitalize on available, unplanned moments when they felt it was appropriate to engage in the homework activities with their children.

I found that out really quick...that *time* will present itself, normally. Somewhere during the week, um...you know that you've got 'til, from *now* until Friday to turn the homework in, so that gives us some flexibility. Sometimes it's that Monday when we do get it done...sometimes it's not 'til that Friday. You know, or somewhere in *between*. You know, I mean it's just when the opportunity is best according to the children, according to your schedule, to their schedule...to whether or not if there's doctor's appointments goin' on during the week, or you know...if it's your social life or whatever may come into play. The time'll usually present itself.

Parents (45%) also spoke about organizing time in accordance with their child's mood, and the importance of capitalizing on moments when the child was most agreeable to engaging in the homework activity. Some parents specifically noted that they waited to engage their child in the activity when he/she was in a "settled" or "calm" mood.

"Yeah, I make sure they eat first, then I get 'em settled. My little ones, then we do the homework."

If you catch the children when they're tired, they don't want to do it...they're irritable, you know. If you catch them when it's a little bit too late, than they're sleepy and they don't want to complete it and it doesn't make it enjoyable. It's like an older child in an older school that's just procrastinating on doing the homework...these babies do it too.

Half of the parents felt supported by other members of their immediate and extended families, and said that this support made it easier to manage to find time to engage in the homework activities with their children. Some parents noted the importance of relying on family during emergency or unexpected situations. Other parents noted their ability to trust and rely on their partner to complete the homework activities with their child should they be unavailable or unable to find time to do so during a particular week

My brother...he'll help them. If I get frustrated, cause if they don't want to do it, or if I just don't have time, my brother will take over, he'll sit there and read it and make them read it. They've got a lot of help that helps them.

Some parents noted a consistent lack of support from family and/or friends due to being a single-parent or having a spouse with a disability. Some parents also discussed their inability to entrust completion of the homework activity with anyone but him or herself.

Like his dad has helped him do homework activities...but like in extreme cases, emergencies, his dad has helped him, but I feel more comfortable...I'm kind of a little control freak when it comes to my son.

Time Management Obstacles

Some parents lacked reliable transportation and/or a valid driver's license. These parents explained how needing to rely on others or using local public transportation was a significant hindrance to managing and organizing time. They specifically talked about the inefficiency of the local mass transit system.

Takes about four hours to get to one place. If you have to go like to out west, it'll take you that long. It takes *soo* long. Cause they have to stop everywhere and you have to get off of the bus and connect to another bus.

Parents (31.8%) also cited their children's behavior as an obstacle to managing time and that they sometimes found it challenging to engage their child in the homework activity. One mother noted that her son was especially stubborn saying, "Sometimes it's hard when they don't wanna...they don't have their mind set on it." Another parent said that for her, "It was like pulling teeth. You know? But if it's something...we try to make them interesting, but then there's some he's just like, 'I don't care', you know? 'Not fazing me'."

There were aspects of daily life that parents perceived as obstacles to finding time to spend with their children. The most commonly noted of these were daily and household-related responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, laundry, etc. Some parents contended with this by completing certain tasks when children were not in the environment. Parents noted that doing this allowed them to focus on their children when they *were* present.

Myself, mixed schedule...I'm off Monday and Tuesday, so she off on Tuesday and Wednesday, so then on Monday I wash the clothes, you know...fix the house and everything...because the babies in the school I don't have nobody with me. I'm trying to do some work, keep all my...it's what I do all the time...and when she is home she do the same thing...clean the house... *before* the kids is coming home.

Cause I have found out the best time for me to mop the floor is while they're asleep.

Parents noted that appointments, such as going to the doctor, meeting with case/ social workers from the Department of Human Services, and/or complying with requirements necessary for receiving government aid were significant obstacles to being able to manage and organize time.

Appointments, doctor's appointments, or something came up that you gotta do at work or whatever. It just comes up and you just you gotta get things done, you try to squeeze

them in and if you don't make the time for it, it won't get done. I remember one time we had a WIC appointment. I showed up about 9 o'clock, I was there until four. I was there all day and I had to go back to work at 5:30. I was like 'ooh, my goodness'.

Yeah, appointments....yes, WIC, oh WIC is the worst. WIC, you're usually there about four hours depending on whether you get quick WIC or not. If you got main WIC, you might as well pack up your whole house and just sit there. Cause it's gonna take you a while. And the food stamp office, you show up for your appointment and then your worker's not there and they make you reschedule.

Parents also explained that caring for and/or helping others sometimes made it difficult to manage and organize their time.

Well, with my sister, I have to pick her up every day from school...she just refuses to drive, she's just afraid, she doesn't like...she's afraid to drive. So I have to pick her up around 1 o'clock.

You know a lot of times I gotta take my momma a lot of places in her car, taking care of her vehicle. So you know most the time when she come over I be like 'T, we gotta go'.

However, some parents specifically noted that responsibility to their child was their highest priority and considered that prior to helping others.

We got a big family too, but it's not *my* family, it's my baby daddy's family. His mom had 12 kids. And she's got twins that's three and I watch them sometimes. So, I say...I do my little boy's homework *then* I come down there and get them. That's what I do. But if his homework ain't done, I ain't gonna do it.

Parents explained that it was difficult to manage and organize time in ways that afforded them the opportunity to interact with their children when their work schedule differed from their child's available time.

My husband works first shift, then when I get off work my husband goes to work. So it's like, I'd see him for half an hour a day and that's it.

If I had a regular work schedule, and you know, knew more than a week in advance what I was working, that would help.

High levels of parental stress were also noted by a couple of parents as an obstacle to engaging in the homework activities.

But a lot of times I'm stressed out and got a lot on my mind and I be like, 'Ba-shh. Forget that right now, we can get to that another', ya know?

Yeah, it could be somethin' like you ain't got no gas for your car. Just worrying about you know, everyday life stuff.

Homework Activity Management

Parents also focused on ways in which they prepared for the homework activities and how they engaged their child in a manner that facilitated efficient use of their time. Within this theme are issues related to how parents prepared for, and ensured completion of, the homework activities.

Nearly 60% of parents engaged in some form of homework activity preparation, and mentioned that doing so made it easier to find time to do the activities. Three distinct forms of preparation were evident within this sub-theme: material, mental, and verbal preparation. All parents who contributed to this conversation explained that they prepared and gathered the materials needed to complete each activity before engaging in it with their child.

But, I usually always have you know all the supplies I need before we sit down and do our homework. And we go to the closet and get it out. I usually have plenty of stuff though in the box. I try to keep it full.

When I get mine on Monday I go and I make a list of what I need.

These parents also mentioned that they thought through how to complete and best engage their child during the activity. Mental preparation entailed thinking about and discussing engagement strategies.

I usually go in and read it and then I think about stuff...like okay...what can I do with this? What kind of fun things can I make with this?

But if it's something...we try to make them interesting, but sometimes it's just the way it's presented and we have to...sometimes my husband and I...sometimes we wait 'til Friday cause we're trying to come up with another way to present it to him.

Of the parents who said they prepared for the activities in some manner, 23% said that they verbally prepared their child for the activity. Parents did this by telling their child what the activity was about, when the activity was due, and when it was likely that they would do it together.

Parents also discussed ways they maintained their child's attention during the homework activity. Some of the specific engagement strategies mentioned included making homework "like a game", parent/child role reversal, avoidance of the activity being "chore-like" or rushed for the child, making the homework activity relevant to their child's life and preferences, and having a specific weekly or daily routine during which the child could expect that the homework activity was going to be completed.

That's the only way he wanted to do it, is if it was a game. So that's the main thing you know we had to make it a game. We sit down and we *play* school.

You know I think the real key especially in the age group we're dealing with here is don't make it a chore. It's gotta be number one, it's gotta be fun. Just like she's gotta want to (laughter from group). Cause if you make it a chore they're gonna show you who's boss.

If you can tie other things, things that happen around the house. We would try to tie into a lot of the activities on the homework activities and ah, compare what the homework was stressing as to what she did on a regular basis, in her bedroom, in her playroom, outside or whatever.

More than half (54.5%) of the parents mentioned the inclusion of siblings during completion of homework activities. While some parents fully involved siblings, others limited sibling involvement during the activity. For example, one mother explained how she allowed the younger sibling to get materials in preparation for the activity, but did not allow him to participate.

See I have another son and he gets in on the homework which he's smaller, he's a year younger and he get in on the homework too.

Yes, he likes to go and get the crayons. I'll say, 'can you go and get the crayons?' And he'll go in and find the crayons, or I'll tell him to go and find the colored paper...ah...the construction paper. And he'll go in the drawer and get it.

Parents also discussed how and why they did or did not alter the physical environment, and where they engaged in the homework activities with their child. Less than half of parents (40.9%) said they turned off the television while they and their children completed the homework activity.

It's off cause the T.V. distracts you.

At that age you can't have the T.V. on because they'll zone into it.

If you're trying to compete with Spongebob or Hannah Montana you, I mean...it's just. I mean forget about it! You gotta get 'em away from the radios, TVs...we turned off the stuff throughout the house. I mean we turned it *off*. We didn't just go in another room and leave the sets on. It was just because their little ears don't miss anything unless they wanna miss it.

Other parents elaborated on why they never turned off the television during the activity.

I think it's real important when it comes to the homework. I don't change the environment very much. I leave the TV going if the TV's playing, if the radio's playing I'll leave the radio goin', if the dogs are running around in the yard or in the house barking because there's a cat outside. I leave those distractions goin' because I know that she's not gonna have a, um, the opportunity to always get a quiet place, everything to be all nice and *calm* when she has to do homework in the future. So, ah...leave those things goin' has a way to help her to concentrate on what she's doing instead of everything around her so she can kind of shut those things out while she does her homework. To not to get real distracted and wonderin' what SpongeBob's doing on the T.V. That *now* we're focusing on your homework. And she's getting' so much better at doing that.

Some parents (40.9%) completed the activity with their child at the kitchen or dining room table. This percentage includes parents who said they do and those who said they do not turn off the television. Thus, while these parents do not specifically alter the environment, they do ensure the use of a consistent location that serves as a “marker” that they are engaged in the homework activity and not with anything else that may be going on around them during that time.

DISCUSSION

The results of this exploratory study suggest that this small sample of Head Start parents used a variety of strategies to manage their time in order to participate with their children in “homework”, a particular type of home-based parent involvement. They appeared to be helped in doing so by resources like social support, and hindered by obstacles, such as lack of transportation. Since there is a paucity of data on the topic of how parents, particularly low-income parents, manage time so that they can be involved with their children, this study provides some valuable starting points for both descriptive and intervention research on this topic as well as suggestions for practice.

Similar to the work of Roy et al. (2004) discussed earlier, parents in the present study emphasized the contribution that consistent resources play in their ability to manage time so that they could find the time to spend time with their children. Findings from this study extend the work of Roy et al. who found that parents manage time by staggering obligations, expanding resources, and decreasing obligations. This study provides parents’ description of time management techniques, including use of organizational aids, maintaining a flexible time perspective, aligning work with the child’s mood, utilizing support of other family members, and actively managing the homework activity itself.

The present study also expands the findings of Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck (2007). This ethnographic study of 14 upper-middle class families revealed barriers to time management such as demanding work schedules, helping others outside of the immediate family, and high levels of parenting stress. However, these families, who commanded considerable resources, never mentioned two of the most passionately discussed “time-takers” for the Head Start parents – contending with unreliable transportation and waiting to meet with case workers. Thus, while there is evidence that finding time to spend with children may be an issue for families across the socioeconomic spectrum, there may be some barriers unique to low-income families who may have fewer resources.

In general, parents in the present study discussed time management in very concrete ways, citing the usefulness of organizational aids and bemoaning the time it takes to use public transportation. Abstract themes, such as organizing time in accordance with child’s mood, were not directly discussed by parents, but were extrapolated from their comments. The absence of abstract discussion was a central finding of Darrah et al. (2007) who concluded that discussing time is difficult for many people. They also noted that time management issues are so deeply interwoven into our lives that it is difficult to recognize, extract, and discuss them. Given these considerations, it was probably an advantage to have parents think about time with respect to a very specific form of home-based parent involvement, the homework activities connected with the Head Start curriculum.

Limitations

The present study is exploratory and was conducted with a very small, nonrepresentative sample of parents from a particular Head Start program. Thus, the results should be regarded as illustrative and a source of ideas for research and some aspects of practice rather than generalizable to a larger population. An additional disadvantage is that so few parents from the low participation homework group agreed to participate in this study or actually attended their focus group after they had agreed to do so.

This study focused on a small subset of home-based parent involvement, parent-initiated activities to promote children's cognitive development, as exemplified by the developmentally appropriate "homework" activities that were connected to the curriculum of this particular Head Start program. Thus, the focus was on a very limited aspect of home-based cognitive stimulation, and the participants were parents who had engaged in this particular aspect. Thus, conclusions cannot be drawn about any of the other numerous aspects of home-based involvement for any of the parents. Parents who did not return any of the homework to the child's classroom, for example, could have been engaging in other types of involvement with their children such as speaking with them throughout the day, including them in performing household chores, and involving them in early literacy activities.

Furthermore, the fact that the focus of the present study is on time management does not mean that a lack of time management skills is the only or even primary factor contributing to many parents' lack of participation in the homework activities program. Time was the focus of this study because the Head Start parents identified it as a major difficulty for them when asked at a parent meeting about what made it hard for them to complete the homework. Obviously, factors such as lack of interest, poor personal educational experiences, dislike of these particular activities, aspects of the physical environment, illness, substance abuse, and chronic stress can contribute to low levels of participation in the homework program as well as home-based parent involvement in general.

Finally, future studies on this topic should use more intensive recruiting techniques so that a larger proportion of parents agree to participate. One suggestion is for future researchers to embed themselves within the program in a manner that increases exposure to family members (e.g., riding the bus home with children, attending parent gathers, talking with parents as they either drop off or pick their children from the classroom). Doing so may increase rapport with family members, some of whom may be potential participants, and others who may serve as gatekeepers. Perhaps trying to schedule individual interviews in the home may have increased the participation response rate. However, the collaborative and dynamic conversations present in the focus groups would have been lost.

Moreover, future studies should involve Head Start parents who are English Language Learners (ELL). By organizing focus groups comprised of only of ELL parents and moderated by a speaker fluent in that language, the conversation flow would remain intact versus disrupted by a translator. Conducting focus groups specific to a particular shared characteristic (like language) may also illuminate culturally-based time management techniques.

Implications for Practice

Despite the limitations of the present exploratory study, it is possible to draw some tentative implications for the efforts of Head Start staff to encourage parents' involvement in their children's learning and development. First, asking parents how they make the time to be involved with their children may result in information that can be shared with other families who are struggling with this issue. Some of the suggestions from the participants in the present study, such as having a routine comprised of when, where, and how to complete the homework activities, including all children in the environment in the activity, and considering the role of television and media as a distraction to the activity may be helpful to other families. Head Start programs could consider highlighting such strategies during parent meetings or perhaps during home visits.

Parent education and intervention efforts designed to increase home-based parent involvement might include a component on family time management. Such a component could include an assessment of the existing supports and barriers to effective time management specific to each family. Then, specific time management strategies could be discussed, along with potential environmental and social supports that would be essential for their implementation. Of utmost importance is for such efforts to mobilize existing resources and be congruent with each family's unique attributes and values, rather than mandating what should or should not be done to manage time.

It is important to recognize that managing time in order to provide isolated segments that can be devoted to specific cognitively stimulating activities may be overwhelming or not feasible for some families. In such situations, programs such as Head Start can focus on alternative options for parent involvement that can be interspersed throughout the day (Montes & Giamartino, 2004). For example, parents could be provided with suggestions for integrating learning opportunities during bath time (e.g., comparison of what floats and what does not), or identifying produce, counting, or weighing items at the grocery store. Thus, although a focus on time management can be an important component of services provided for many families, it should not be considered a panacea for increasing home-based parent involvement. Although it is not possible to remove all of the impediments to home-based parent involvement, Head Start programs may be able to assist families to manage time in a manner that supports occurrences of parent-child interaction and teaching.

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