

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Head Start Parents' Reports of Managing Time to Support Parent Involvement

Heather S. Wallace

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sandra Twardosz

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

In order to encourage parents' involvement in children's learning and development, teachers in one Head Start program sent a developmentally appropriate activity, linked to the classroom curriculum, home each week for parents and children to do together. This exploratory study used focus groups to examine how parents made the time to complete these "homework" activities. Parents reported using a variety of time management strategies and supports such as organizational aids, supportive family members, routines, and a flexible time perspective. They also discussed the obstacles they faced in managing time such as work schedules, high levels of parental stress, and household responsibilities. These results are limited by sample size and characteristics. However, asking parents how they make the time to be involved with their children may result in information that can be shared with other Head Start families who are struggling with this issue.

Home-based parent involvement that focuses on children's intellectual development has been demonstrated as one of the mechanisms that improves school readiness, regardless of income level (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). However, a noted trend is 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). Ironically, it is this very population that benefits most from "home-based parent involvement" activities such as shared book reading interactions (Raikes, Pan, Luze, Tamis-LeMonda, Brooks-Gunn, 2006).

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 (HIPPY) 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. Qualitative interviews with HIPPY program staff indicated a wide range of parent involvement. While some parents may have enjoyed the support of the group meetings, it appeared that they may have faced significant

barriers to being able to conduct the activities with their children (Baker, 1999) on their own time.

A lack of perceived “available time” to dedicate to home-based parent involvement activities may be connected with some very real issues like parents’ work schedules and long work-to-home commutes (Weiss, Mayer, Kreider, Vaughan, Dearing, Hencke, et al., 2003) (Heymann & Earle, 2001), regardless of income level. However, an investigation of time management strategies may be particularly salient for Head Start families given that previous work noted 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). The availability of resources and presence of routines was presumed to play a critical role in the creation of time dedicated to home-based parent involvement activities in this study.

KEY STUDY INFORMATION

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. The intention of this study is to explore, through focus group conversations, the ways in which parents managed time to engage in these “homework activities” with their children, and the difficulties involved in doing so.

Methods

This study was conducted in close partnership with the Knoxville/Knox County Head Start (KKCHS) program. 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.

KKCHS surveyed parents and learned that while they liked the activities, things like purchasing the necessary supplies and finding time to do the activities were barriers. KKCHS addressed the need for supplies by providing a backpack filled with materials required to complete the activities for each child. However, some parents continued to report being unable to find the time to complete the homework activities, while others were able to consistently complete them. KKCHS partnered with the authors of this study to shed light on this issue.

Participants (n = 22) in this study were the primary legal caregivers (referred to throughout as ‘parent(s)’) of a child enrolled in KKCHS. Most parents were from a two-parent household. Separate focus groups were conducted for parents who completed most of the homework activities and for parents who completed less than half of the activities. The reason for conducting separate focus groups was to encourage parents to respond in a manner that was most representative of their experiences. In other words, we did not want parents to feel “pressured” to respond in a particular way that was not representative of their experiences because of others’ statements. A total of 18 high-homework completion group parents participated in three focus groups and four low-homework completion group parents participated in two focus groups. During the focus groups parents answered and discussed the following questions:

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?

Originally, a 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.

Results

Three primary categories emerged from analyses: time management strategies and supports, time management obstacles, and homework activity management.

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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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. Parents also explained that caring for and/or helping others sometimes made it difficult to manage and organize their time. 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. High levels of parental stress were also noted by a couple of parents as an obstacle to engaging in the homework activities.

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. Mental preparation entailed thinking about and discussing engagement strategies. 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 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. More than half (54.5%) of the parents mentioned the inclusion of siblings during completion of homework activities. 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.

IMPLICATIONS

It is important to realize that we cannot generalize the results of this study beyond this sample. However, the experiences of this small group of parents could provide some valuable information applicable to other families. For instance, having a routine comprised of when, where, and how to complete the homework activities, involving other children in the activity, and considering television as a distraction may be helpful to other families. Head Start programs could consider highlighting these and other potential strategies during parent meetings or perhaps during home visits. In practice, this may take the form of prompting families to reflect on aspects of their home life that may help or hinder engagement in activities related to home-based parent involvement and to plan accordingly.

Parent education and intervention efforts designed to increase home-based parent involvement might also 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. 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.

Managing time in order to provide isolated segments that can be devoted to home-based parent involvement 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.

CONCLUSION

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 little information 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express our deep appreciation to the participating parents and to the staff of the Knoxville-Knox County Head Start and in particular, Renee Hauge, Nancy Thomas, Joyce Farmer, Phyllis Martinelli, and Suzanne Inman.

REFERENCES

- Baker, A. J. L., Piotrkowski, C. S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1999). The home instruction program for pre-school youngsters (HIPPY). *The Future of Children, 9*, 116-133.
- Eccles, J. S., & Harold, R. D. (1996). Family involvement in children and adolescent's schooling. In A. Booth & J. F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 3-34). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Henderson, A. & Berla, N. (Eds.). (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education.
- Heymann, S. J., & Earle, A. (2001). The impact of parental working conditions on school-age children: The case of evening work, *Community, Work & Family, 4*(3), 305-325.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education?. *Review of educational research, 67*(1), 3-42.
- Montes, G., & Giamartino, R., Jr. (2004). Context specificity of family activities that foster early literacy: Evidence from the National Household Education Survey 1999. In D. Lapp, C.C. Block, E. J. Cooper, J. Flood, N. Roser, & J. V. Tinajero (Eds.), *Teaching all the children: Strategies for developing literacy in an urban setting* (pp. 31-41). New York: Guilford Press.
- Petrill, S. A., Pike, A., Price, T., & Plomin, R. (2004). Chaos in the home and socioeconomic status are associated with cognitive development in early childhood: Environmental mediators identified in a genetic design. *Intelligence, 32*, 445-460.
- Raikes, H., Pan, B. A., Luze, G., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Brooks-Gunn, J. (2006) Mother-child book reading in low-income families: Correlates and outcomes during the first three years of life. *Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*. Paper 39.
- Valiente, C., Lemery-Chalfant, K., & Reiser, M. (2007). Pathways to problem behaviors: Chaotic homes, parent and child effortful control, and parenting. *Social Development, 16*(2), 249-267.
- Weiss, H. B., Mayer, E., Kreider, H., Vaughan, M., Dearing, E., Hencke, R., & Pinto, K. (2003). Making it work: Low-income working mothers' involvement in their children's education. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(4), 879-901.