RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Parent Engagement during Home Visits in Early Head Start and Head Start: Useful Strategies for Practitioners

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This study explores strategies used by early childhood professionals (ECPs) involved in a school readiness intervention to support parent engagement in young children's learning. In this study, we used video recordings to understand the ECP-parent interactions during Early Head Start and Head Start home visits. We coded the videos for the number of parent engagement strategies that were used by ECPs as well as the quality of parent engagement during visits, including the amount of parent-child interaction that took place during the visits. Findings have implications for the implementation of the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework, and the professional development of early childhood professionals.

Support of parent and family engagement is a key tenet of both Early Head Start and Head Start. In 2011, the Office of Head Start introduced the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework as a guide for implementing Head Start Performance Standards related to parent and family engagement (ACF, 2011). The PFCE Framework includes foundational elements such as program leadership, continuous improvement and professional development. It also includes impact areas such as family partnerships, teaching and learning, and program environment. All of these are intended to be implemented in support of positive family engagement (e.g., parent-child relationships) and child outcomes. Head Start and Early Head Start programs can benefit from strategies to help effectively execute this Framework.

Parent engagement, defined as parent partnerships with professionals as well as parent relationships with children (Sheridan, Marvin, Knoche, & Edwards, 2008), is an important component of home visiting. Positive engagement between parents and professionals are is considered a primary protective factors (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001) for young children. Partnerships between parents and professionals act as safeguards and are particularly important during the infant, toddler and preschool years (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999) when parents develop an understanding of the role they want to play in their children's education. Collaborative parent-professional partnerships often correlate with positive social-emotional and behavioral outcomes for children and families, and can promote intervention effectiveness and efficiency (Knoche, Cline & Marvin, 2012; Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010). However, partnership must extend *beyond* parental involvement in professionally-designed plans and activities to be effective (Haynes et al., 1989).

Furthermore, a specific focus on the parent-child relationship during home visits has also proven to support engagement. Peterson, Luze, Eshbaugh, Jeon, and Kantz (2007) found that when home visitors in an EHS program focused on facilitating parent-child interactions, mothers were more likely to stay highly engaged in these type of activities. Higher engagement was observed in mothers when the home visitor discussed child development or family issues and less engaged when the topics were community resources. Similarly, Roggman, Boyce, Cook and Jump (2001) found that the EHS visitor's ability to encourage parent-child interactions was a factor in positive outcomes based on ratings of parent satisfaction and improvements, as well as visitor reports of "partnerships." Subsequent evaluations revealed that home visits that engaged the parent and focused their attention on children's development, and their reported concerns or needs, significantly reduced the drop-out rates of parents enrolled in EHS programs (Roggman, Cook, Peterson, & Raikes, 2008).

Given the importance of parent engagement, the *Getting Ready* intervention for early childhood programs (Sheridan, Marvin, Knoche, & Edwards, 2008) was designed to provide an integrated, ecological approach to early intervention and school readiness programs that is research-based, family-centered and collaborative in nature. Through use of *Getting Ready strategies* (Table 1), professionals provide services through a prevention lens that focuses on parents' abilities to (a) engage in warm and responsive interactions with their child, (b) support their children's autonomy, and (c) participate in children's learning. The focus on parent-professional relationships and parent-child interactions is believed to enhance not only children's developmental readiness for school but parents' readiness to act as advocates and support their children's learning.

The strategies that constitute *Getting Ready* are directly aligned with the Head Start PFCE Framework, and contribute to a program environment that encourages relationships with families, and provides a focus for professional development with staff. Furthermore the intervention is directly designed to support family engagement outcomes, including parent-child relationships, as well as child outcomes. In past studies, we have learned that families and children benefit from involvement in the *Getting Ready* intervention. Specifically, children have experienced significant gains in social-emotional and early literacy skills (Sheridan et al., 2010; 2011; 2014) and parents have demonstrated improved parenting practices and engagement with their children (Knoche et al., 2012).

TABLE 1
Getting Ready Strategies

Getting Ready Strategies	Definition/Instructions
Establish/re-establish relationship with parent	Meaningful interaction and conversation exchange between the Early Childhood Professional (ECP) and parent that convey support, caring, or interest in family activities and well-being on the part of the facilitator. Exchanges personal information, acknowledges parent's response, discusses topics outside the bounds of the home visit; "small talk."
Establish dyadic context	Elements of the environment are intentionally and actively arranged or rearranged to increase probability of developmentally matched, mutually enjoyable parent-child interaction; makes efforts (irrelevant to success) to provide activities that support dyadic/parent-child interaction either directly through parent or indirectly through child.
Focus parent's attention on child strengths	Verbal statements are used to comment upon child's strengths and to draw parent's attention to particular competencies or actions within child. These comments may be in retrospect or occurring during the home visit.
Affirm parents' competence	Developmentally supportive interactions are warmly recognized and expanded upon, as are characteristics of child competence.
Provide developmental information	Verbally labels or interprets child's emotional, cognitive, language, and/or motor abilities within context of play and interaction. ECP provides parents with education around developmental milestones and why or how to engage child in an activity.
Elicit parent observations	Through questions or supportive statements, invites parents' input regarding child's development, likes/dislikes, and supportive strategies. Focus is on observations parent makes about the child.
Discuss/Prioritize concerns	This will typically occur during agenda setting or planning for next visit. Discusses concerns for child as seen by ECP and parent. Collaborates with parent to select concerns to focus on. Engages parent in conversation about priorities and desires; might ask about concerns. This is a support for discussion; parent might not have any concerns.
Brainstorm	This process is collaborative, a back and forth between ECP and parent. Invites parent to brainstorm/select strategies that fit into their home and daily routine.
Suggest/ Provide directives	This process is directive. The ECP makes explicit statements to parent about behaviors to support the target child's development and /or parent-child interaction. This is typically not done as part of a collaborative conversation with parent.
Model/Promote practice and interaction	Dyadic interaction roles are momentarily taken on by ECP to enhance parent's repertoire of developmentally appropriate strategies for interacting with child. Whether prompted directly or indirectly, parent responds by trying out the modeled behavior; it is promoting practice and modeling only if ECP demonstrates and turns it back to parent to practice.
Discuss future plans and goals, directions	Discussion of strategies that will be used at home and/or in classroom to support child's development and how those strategies will be carried out. Keeping track of progress and activities for next contact/visit may also be discussed.

Study Description

The current study explored how *Getting Ready* intervention strategies were used during EHS and HS home visits, and investigated whether specific individual strategies supported the early childhood professional's (ECP) overall success in promoting parent engagement in home visits. This makes a contribution towards "unpacking the box" of early childhood home visits (Peterson et al., 2007); we don't always know what happens during home visits with families. It adds to a limited knowledge base on the specific qualities that define quality parent-provider interactions during home visits, and describes strategies that can promote parent-child interactions. Furthermore, it is timely because it informs the efforts of EHS and HS programs that are accountable for implementing Head Start Performance Standards related to parent and family engagement via the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework (ACF, 2011).

Participants in the current study were 18 EHS home visitors and 14 HS classroom teachers involved in the *Getting Ready* project. Our research team video recorded the home visits for these 32 early childhood professionals (ECPs) and coded the visits for ECP use of Getting Ready strategies across every one minute of the visit. This means that *Getting Ready* strategy use was coded if it was observed to occur at all during a one-minute interval. During these same intervals, the frequency of interaction between (a) parents and ECPs, (b) parents and children, and (c) ECPs and children, during the home visit were also coded. At the end of each 10-minute segment of a home visit, general levels of parent engagement and ECP success were assessed.

Key Findings

By coding the video recordings of home visits, we learned that that the ECPs in the EHS and HS programs regularly used a variety of the *Getting Ready* parent engagement strategies (Table 1). They used an average of one *Getting Ready* strategy every two minutes during visits with families. The strategies used the <u>most</u> were *establishing relationships with parents*, *focusing parents' attention on children's strengths*, *affirming parents' competence* and *establishing the context for parent-child interactions*. The ECPs also regularly prompted parent engagement by *asking for parental observations and ideas* and *suggesting* specific actions with the children in the visit. The strategies that were used the <u>least</u> by ECPS were *brainstorming*, *modeling* and *discussing concerns*. This indicates an important area for focus and future support. ECPs in Early Head Start more frequently *provided developmental information* to parents, and this was used less by Head Start professionals. ECPs in Head Start more frequently used *modeling* and *discussing future plans and goals with families;* these were used less by EHS home visitors. We found that the more the ECPs asked for parent observations and ideas, the higher the rating of their overall success in engaging the parent. This suggests that involving parents in decision making during home visits is important. Parents and children were observed to be working together during the home visits at similar rates across programs. However ECPs in EHS interacted with *parents* at a slightly higher rate than HS providers; alternatively, ECPs in HS interacted with *children* with more frequency than their EHS colleagues.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

The study suggests that the *Getting Ready* strategies are perhaps one means of achieving the outcomes or activating the impact areas of the PFCE Framework (ACF, 2011) and is therefore a program that might be useful to Early Head Start and Head Start programs. The PFCE approach is intended to be individualized and flexible to meet the needs and priorities of many different families. Consequently, ECPs in EHS and HS programs need to be able to comfortably engage parents in ways that are appropriate to the strengths and needs of the family and children. Data indicate that the *Getting Ready* strategies can be individualized and used to meet the needs of a range of program and population contexts, in different types of programs serving different ages of children, and with professionals of varying education and early childhood experience. EHS and HS programs should consider training and supporting teachers and home visitors in the use of *Getting Ready* strategies during parent interactions.

Additionally, findings from the present study can be used to inform professional development and training efforts for home visiting professionals. The study highlights specific ECP behaviors that did and did not occur during EHS and HS home visits with families. This helps show what strategies teachers and home visitors are comfortable using with families, and the strategies they need additional support in using. Training needs are therefore identified. For example, the least used strategies were *brainstorming, modeling* and *discussing concerns.* Teachers and home visitors might be needed to be supported in these areas to effectively support parent engagement during home visits. EHS professionals were observed to be engaging with families more than HS professionals, while HS professionals spent more time with children. These contacts might be appropriate given program needs, but perhaps HS professionals could be supported in increasing time spent with parents during home visits.

We also learned that the more that ECPs prompted parents to share observations and ideas, the more successful teachers and home visitors were in engaging parents in visits. This means that involving parents in decision making during home visits and conferences is critical. Creating a collaborative, back-and-forth conversation is essential. While parent engagement is an important part the Head Start philosophy, teachers and other professionals might benefit from specific support in HOW to support and involve families. Teachers and home visitors might benefit from specific, concrete strategy descriptions for interacting with parents in ways that will foster productive engagement with the ECP and the children. The *Getting Ready* strategies provide clear definitions of behaviors that support parent engagement. The strategies also provide a way for directors to evaluate providers' efforts with parents over time.

Finally, our results suggest that professional development efforts at the pre-service or in-service levels may be well advised to include practice in the use and application of a wide range of parent engagement approaches such as the *Getting Ready* strategies to best develop the skill set of professionals. This is critical since family factors, program schedules and ECPs' own self-efficacy due to experience or lack thereof, can influence their interactions with parents. The *Getting Ready* strategies include behaviors all ECPs can use if they are working with infants, toddlers or preschool children and their families, whether in home-based only programs or center-based programs and can be used in all interactions with families, including parent-teacher conferences and home visits. ECPs should feel that in every interaction with parents they have a collection of strategies that they can use to establish a healthy working relationship with parents, and help parents move to new levels of engagement with their children.

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