

Father Engagement in Home Visiting: Lessons from Massachusetts

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Background

Home visiting and other family support programs historically have focused almost exclusively on mothers as the primary service recipients. During the past few decades, parenting programs, including home visiting, have greatly expanded their efforts to engage fathers in services, reflecting a growing awareness of the importance of father involvement in both children's lives and family support services.^{1,2}

Since 1998, the Children's Trust of Massachusetts has invested considerable time and resources toward promoting father involvement in Healthy Families Massachusetts (HFM), a statewide home visiting program for first-time young parents. In FY20, nearly a fifth of all home visits included a co-parent, and almost half of participants had at least one home visit with a co-parent.¹ HFM data used in a previous study revealed that among visits that included a "co-parent", about 90% were with the child's other biological parent.³

Father engagement in home visiting may enhance father's knowledge of parenting and child development and bolster their confidence as parents.⁴ It may also provide opportunities for parents to improve and negotiate their co-parenting relationship⁵ and reduce maternal parenting stress.⁶ Each of these potential benefits could improve family functioning and children's development. Much of the research on father engagement to date has examined barriers to fathers' participation in home visiting rather than looking at targeted engagement strategies and supports that can promote father engagement.^{4,7}

Present Study

The present study provides an in-depth look at father engagement in home visiting using qualitative data from home visitors and families enrolled in HFM. First, the study examines the process of father engagement, including home visitors' techniques to engage fathers in home visits—potential causes for variation in father engagement—and what engagement looks like. Second, the study explores the benefits of father engagement in home visiting.

Methods

Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted between 2019 and 2021 with fathers ($n=9$), mothers (who were co-parents with participating fathers; $n=6$), and home visitors ($n=14$) across six HFM programs. We selected programs that varied in father participation in home visits, focusing on those with male home visitors. Data were coded thematically based on study goals.

Research Questions



What techniques do home visitors use to engage fathers?

What does father engagement look like?

What are the benefits of father engagement?

¹ This report uses gendered language when describing family configuration. This is due to an explicit focus on father engagement in home visiting.

Findings

What techniques do home visitors use to engage fathers?

HFM home visitors used two broad types of engagement techniques: (1) techniques to draw fathers into the home visit, and (2) techniques to emphasize the benefits of home visiting to fathers.

| Techniques to Draw Fathers into Home Visits | |
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| <p>Indirect Engagement: Home visitors engage fathers via mothers when fathers are not present. Home visitors may inquire about fathers’ availability or contact information, leave curriculum or resources for fathers, or reference fathers during discussions with mothers (e.g., suggesting fathers’ possible perspective).</p> | <p><i>“Say when Mom’s pregnant, talking about the pregnancy, getting ready, creating a birth plan... I bring the information she can go over with him. You have to work through the mom to be able to get dad in.” – Home Visitor</i></p> |
| <p>Enabling Access: Home visitors make visits more accessible to fathers by inviting them to enroll in HFM, actively planning home visits around fathers’ schedules, or conducting visits in locations convenient to both parents.</p> | <p><i>“I’m not going to lie. At the first meeting, I was on my phone kind of just looking and listening to music... Then [the home visitor] had me sign a paper so that way I can be her secondary and stuff. If she’s not there, he can talk to me too.” - Father</i></p> |
| <p>Demonstrative Interest: Home visitors’ express interest in fathers in an approachable, welcoming, and judgment-free manner. Home visitors may adapt their body language or communication style or initiate informal conversations with fathers to develop a rapport.</p> | <p><i>“She definitely made the environment feel safe, like there’s going to be no judgment passed with the things that we would tell her about our past or whatever’s going on.” - Father</i></p> |
| Techniques to Emphasize Benefits of Home Visiting to Fathers | |
| <p>Role Highlighting and Empowerment: Home visitors underscore the importance of fathers’ roles in the family and draw attention to their strengths. Home visitors may compliment fathers on what they are doing well, encourage and support them, or uplift fathers’ perspectives and feelings in conversations where both parents are present.</p> | <p><i>She says [I’m doing a good job as a dad] all the time.... She says we work very well as a team and that I do things before my girlfriend asks me to. - Father</i></p> |
| <p>Father Inclusive Programming: Home visitors actively include both parents in the home visit. Home visitors may probe fathers about their general well-being and parenting, be responsive to fathers’ concerns, or tailor the curriculum by planning activities or topics that address fathers’ needs.</p> | <p><i>“Saying, ‘Dad, what’s your experience as a dad been like this week? What do you think about what Mom’s saying? Is this your experience?’ Just really trying to pull him into the conversation and allowing him the space to feel important and share his thoughts.” – Home Visitor</i></p> |

What contributes to variation in father engagement?

We observed four factors that influenced home visitors’ choice of engagement techniques and fathers’ responsiveness to these techniques:

- (1) External factors influencing fathers, such as work schedules or poor personal or co-parenting relationships with the mothers
- (2) Fathers’ self-motivation to participate in HFM and take advantage of the services offered
- (3) Home visitors’ commitment and persistence (e.g., repeated use of engagement techniques) to capture fathers resistant to HFM
- (4) HFM programs’ views on father engagement, such as encouragement for home visitors to include fathers or protocols that restrict fathers’ access to the full range of HFM supports

What does father engagement look like?

Father engagement goes beyond simply attending a visit. Participants described a range of behaviors and attitudes that were indicative of father engagement.

Father participation in activities or discussions during home visits was observed as an indicator of engagement. At home visits, fathers may initiate topics of discussion, share opinions, ask questions, respond to others, or actively listen. Between home visits, some fathers reported applying and practicing skills and techniques imparted by their home visitor pertaining to parenting (e.g., comforting baby, potty training), co-parenting (e.g., communication) and self-improvement (e.g., anger management). An additional marker of engagement was fathers’ prioritization of home visits, demonstrated by planning their day around scheduled visits or reaching out to their home visitor to adjust the timing when unable to attend.

“I asked for the pointers [around communication] ... So that way some of our conversations don’t start to become arguments and stuff. I know how frustrated people can be when they’re very tired and don’t have a lot of energy.” - Father

“The way she can explain certain things just make you want to feel good about what you’re doing. It’s just so helpful and she keeps us in line almost. The way she helps is perfect. I feel like I couldn’t ask for anyone better to help us with the baby than [our home visitor]. She’s amazing at what she does.” - Father

Father engagement was also evidenced by fathers sharing what they value about HFM. Fathers described appreciation for their home visitors and the impact of the program on themselves and their families.

What are the benefits of father engagement?

When fathers are successfully engaged, participants identified a range of benefits to the family unit:

Fathers’ Evolved Awareness: Fathers arrive at a new understanding of their role and the potential effects of their actions or inactions on their child or coparent.

“I really wasn’t that much aware [before home visiting] to a lot of things that I am now and what those things were... One of them was how to help [mother of baby] feel comfortable and another thing was how relevant dads are in their child’s life.”

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| <p>Fathers’ Confidence in Fitness to Parent: Fathers feel more confident as parents or mothers recognize that fathers are capable and eager parents.</p> | <p><i>“[Home visitor] told me things like to just focus and pay attention. You don't need to stress out if there isn't one other person there to help you... If you're alone, you have to know how to do certain things. So, she helped me like figure that out for myself... I was the first one to figure out how to even use the stroller we have. I would figure it out and I would show [mother of baby], show my mom, show her mom.” - Father</i></p> |
| <p>Increased Coparenting and Teamwork: Parents feel a sense of teamwork. They divide responsibilities, make decisions jointly, or work together to accomplish shared goals.</p> | <p><i>“Just the fact that he knows how to handle her tantrums now; I’m not alone in that. Even in the beginning, in the early stages, when she was this little thing that didn’t really move much, he didn’t really like to feed her or do any of that, so that was really hard on me until [our home visitor] was like getting him more slowly involved and making him more comfortable with holding her and changing her so I could have my own time.” -Mother</i></p> |
| <p>Healthy Communication and Relationship: Parents exhibit stronger communication or conflict resolution skills.</p> | <p><i>“The fact that we were both able to sit with her and talk with her and say exactly how we feel without having it blow out of proportion is like pretty much what helped us.” - Father</i></p> |
| <p>Mental Health Support or Stress Reduction: Parent stress levels are reduced through the support they receive from their home visitor or one another during home visits.</p> | <p><i>“I actually didn’t know until the home visitor came and told us that fathers can have baby blues too and I’m like, ‘What?’... I thought it was only moms’... He helped us through it. He told us some ways that we can bring our spirits up like going outside, not really being inside moping, crying, stuff like that. Like small tips to help us get through the moment.” - Father</i></p> |
| <p>Enhanced Family Functioning²: Support and tips provided by the home visitor to facilitate parenting and everyday life for the family.</p> | <p><i>“We are really set in a good routine now. Both of the kids take naps at the same time and things like that. And then it gives my girlfriend and I time to do other things... She will do the laundry and I can clean and just stuff like that.” - Father</i></p> |

Discussion

This exploratory study examined the process of father engagement---what it looks like, what techniques home visitors use to increase fathers’ access to program services, and the potential benefits of program engagement for fathers and families using a precision home visiting lens. One of the main contributions of the study was a detailed description of how home visitors tailor their techniques to better engage fathers. The key ingredients noted by home visitors included creating more opportunities for fathers to participate in home visiting and highlighting the importance of fathers’ role in the family system. The particular set of techniques home visitors selected were contingent upon several father, family, home visitor, and programmatic factors. Fathers demonstrated their engagement through increased motivation to actively participate during visits and hone their skills between visits. The benefits mentioned by fathers, mothers, and home visitors were not limited to fostering positive father-child relationships, but extended to fathers’ and mothers’ own well-being, as well as enhanced communication and relationship skills necessary for positive coparenting. Findings can inform

² A subset of families in the sample reported having strong parenting, co-parenting, and interpersonal skills to begin with, but still benefited as a family from program participation.

program policies, protocols, guidelines, and trainings that will better equip home visiting programs to more actively engage fathers in program services.

References

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