



ENGAGING FATHERS

in Home Visiting Programs

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CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance





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THE PURPOSE of this brief is to explore possible barriers to father engagement in home visiting programs, explain some key principles of father engagement, and share promising strategies from the Dads Matter-Home Visitation (HV) intervention (Bellamy et al., 2020) and other research studies.



Early childhood is a critical period of development. Home visiting programs support a safe and nurturing environment for children by promoting positive parenting and school readiness and by reducing the risk of child maltreatment (Avellar & Supplee, 2013; Peacock et al, 2013). Evidence of their effectiveness in supporting positive child outcomes has propelled expansion of these programs in the United States (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Michalopoulos et al, 2019).

Despite the proven benefits, many studies suggest that home visiting outcomes fade over time (Guterman, 1999, 2001; Le Roux et al, 2014). Researchers have been exploring why this is the case and testing strategies to extend positive outcomes (Ammerman, et al, 2016). One promising strategy is to increase fathers' engagement in home visiting services. Research on fathers' engagement in other child and family interventions, including parent training and family therapy, suggests that fathers' participation may also boost mothers' engagement in services (Eckenrode et al, 2000; Fals-Stewart et al, 2004) as well as improve overall family outcomes (Bagner & Eyberg, 2003; Gervan et al, 2012). **Furthermore, the positive contributions of father involvement for child well-being are well documented** (e.g., Amodia-Bidakowska et al, 2020; Sarkadi et al, 2008) and fathers who participated in home visiting programs have reported improved knowledge and skills related to parenting, caregiving, communication, and stress management (Sandstrom et al, 2015).

Some home visiting programs do provide services for fathers and are giving more attention to the role of the father in the family (Sandstrom et al, 2015). However, none of the original evidence-supported perinatal home visitation models were designed to target fathers as primary service recipients or to address father-related influences on children's well-being (Bellamy et al, 2020). Even as some have begun attempts to engage fathers, most home visiting programs have struggled with low and irregular participation of fathers (Holmberg & Olds, 2015; Thullen et al., 2014). Some evidence shows that staff are willing to try to engage fathers; however, they feel unprepared to do so (Perry et al, 2016). To effectively engage fathers, new strategies must be developed to increase the frequency and quality of fathers' participation, and they must be shared widely with programs.

The purpose of this brief is to explore possible barriers to father engagement in home visiting programs, explain some key principles of father engagement, and share promising strategies from the Dads Matter-Home Visitation (HV) intervention (Bellamy et al, 2020) and other research studies.

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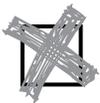
BARRIERS TO FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

This section presents three common concerns or misperceptions that have been expressed by home visiting program staff², along with examples of what research has to say about each set of concerns and misperceptions.

A.

COMMON CONCERN OR MISPERCEPTION

“ If I include fathers in home visiting, it will damage my ability to serve moms. ”



Home visitors typically view mothers, or mothers and their children, as their primary clients. This perception is hardly surprising given that home visiting models were originally designed for mothers and pregnant women, and most training materials focus on providing services for mothers and their young children.



Home visiting can be time-intensive; home visitors work hard to establish trusting and supportive relationships with mothers. They may worry that engaging fathers could hurt these relationship or restrict the limited time they have to serve mothers.



Serving two parents is a more complex task. Home visitors must consider both parents' needs, goals, schedules, and strengths.



If the parents do not get along, serving both can be very challenging.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Engaging both parents is worth the time and effort required.



Data from the Dads Matter-HV intervention indicates that working with both parents may leave less time to provide services to mothers, but it does not damage home visitors' relationships with mothers (Bellamy et al., 2020).



Although mothers sometimes engage in gate-keeping behavior or prefer to have home visits to themselves (Sandstrom et al., 2015), data from the Supporting Father Involvement intervention showed that child outcomes improved when both parents were engaged in the intervention (Pruett et al, 2017).



If mothers and fathers receive similar education and supports to improve their parenting skills and coparenting strategies, children can reap the benefits from parents who have better coordinated parenting approaches. (Berkien et al, 2012).



Positive impacts can be enhanced by encouraging mothers and fathers to support each other's parenting and consider each other's well-being, particularly when parents are facing trauma or stress (Galbally et al, 2019; Plantin et al, 2011).

² These concerns and misperceptions are drawn from the author's observations from the Dads Matter-HV research intervention, which included a father-engagement training session where home visitors discussed perceived barriers to engaging fathers in home visiting programs (Bellamy et al, 2020).

BARRIERS TO FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

B.

COMMON CONCERN OR MISPERCEPTION

“ Most of the fathers in the families I work with are absent.”

-  If the mother is the parent initially referred to services, which is a common practice, home visitors may not have initial contact with the father.
 -  They then may assume he is either not interested in participating in the program or not available to participate.
 -  Some may assume the mother does not want the father to participate, or they may not ask about the father for fear of upsetting or offending the mother.
-  The father may be at work or at school when home visiting services are offered.
-  The father may live apart from the mother or not be in contact with her and his children, but that does not mean he is not interested in being more involved.
-  Regardless of the situation, home visitors should probe sensitively³ for information on fathers' whereabouts and interest, or they could inadvertently miss the opportunity to work with fathers and mothers together.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Home visiting programs have an opportunity to contact fathers who are involved in their children's lives and/or identify any barriers that may have prevented them being fully involved.

-  Many fathers have complex relationships with their children and the mothers of their children. These relationships vary considerably in terms of length and type of involvement (Palkovitz, 2019).
-  Most resident fathers, and many non-resident fathers, are positively engaged in the lives of their children (McClay & Ramos-Olazagasti, 2019).
-  Fathers of infants and young children may not reside with the mothers and children, but data from various studies indicate that most non-resident fathers are indeed involved with their children, particularly when their children are young (Lundberg et al, 2007; Edin & Nelson, 2013; National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2018a).
-  Because home visiting targets parents of young children, this service provides a unique opportunity to engage both parents at a time when fathers are most likely to be involved. An evidence-supported strategy is to assess the mother-father relationship early on by talking directly with fathers and mothers (Bellamy et al, 2020; Guterman et al, 2018).
-  If the father is not living in the home, the home visitor should assess how often he sees his children, what role he has in the family and in caring for his children, what role he would like to have, and whether or not he and the mother have an effective coparenting relationship (Bellamy et al, 2020).
-  Evidence-supported interventions indicate that home visitors can work with fathers and mothers individually if they cannot be served together in the same visit (Guterman et al, 2018).

³ Staff should be trained in cultural competence and sensitive interview techniques so they are aware of concerns that parents may have about disclosing information.

BARRIERS TO FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

C.

COMMON CONCERN OR MISPERCEPTION

“Many of the fathers in the families I work with bring risks to the family, like domestic violence.”

-  Domestic violence is a concern commonly voiced by home visitors. Some fathers do present risks to families, but home visitors must assess the risk for domestic violence and not assume it is happening.
-  Fathers (and mothers) may have other concerns. In addition to screening for any history of family violence, home visitors should also be prepared to assess all parents for issues such as substance abuse, criminal justice involvement, or mental health problems.
-  Home visiting programs should develop intervention and referral mechanisms to help families deal with all presenting issues.
-  When home visitors have concerns about fathers, they may be inclined to respond by not providing fathers access to services. Unfortunately, this may mean some fathers do not receive services that might have benefitted their children and families.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Most fathers do not pose risks—and home visiting programs can be early referral points if either parent needs extra support.

-  Most fathers, like most mothers, do not present substantial risks to children and families. In fact, if mothers are struggling with their own barriers to effective parenting, fathers can play an important buffering role for children (Giurgescu et al, 2018; Mezulis et al, 2004; Radunovich et al, 2017).
-  Fathers and mothers can play a supportive role for one another. They can help each other weather the stress that can come along with the transition to parenthood (Gillis et al, 2019).
-  If there is a history of family violence, some fathers will not be able to safely participate in home visits. Home visitors can play an important role in assessing families for these risks (Jack et al, 2017).
-  Although home visiting programs cannot directly provide services to address domestic violence, substance use disorders, or mental health problems, they can be an early referral point to support mothers and fathers in accessing these and other needed services.
-  If fathers are excluded from assessment and referral opportunities, families may be left without the benefit of the supports they need. Home visiting is an important entry point to systems of care (Goldberg et al, 2018).

FOUR KEY PRINCIPLES OF FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN HOME VISITING SERVICES

Drawing on the existing literature on father engagement in child and family services, including home visiting, and findings from the Dads Matter-HV studies (Guterman et al, 2018; Bellamy et al, 2020), four key principles can be used to guide the engagement of fathers in home visiting services. Although home visiting models use a variety of service approaches and program content, these principles can be applied across home visiting broadly.



Engage fathers at the earliest stages of service.

- Families need to understand that services are for both parents. Mothers and fathers play important roles in the lives of their children. Families are more likely to achieve better outcomes if both parents participate in services together.
- Initial communication should include both parents.
 - It may be harder to communicate with both parents if they live in separate homes, but the initial phone call should still emphasize the importance of both parents' involvement.
- If workers assume that both parents will participate in services, then fathers may be more likely to participate.
- All communications, including phone calls, texts, letters, and intake and assessment forms, should address mothers and fathers and emphasize that the service is a family intervention.



Train all agency staff who interact with families on how to foster a culture of father engagement.

- Families who receive home visiting services interact with a variety of different staff, especially at the outset. Front desk staff, receptionists, administrative support, and those that refer families to home visiting services can either discourage—or encourage—father engagement.
- Although most early contact with families may be in the home or by phone, train all staff, not just the home visitors, to intentionally welcome, engage, and serve dads. One staff member communicating negative feelings about working with fathers can undermine the work of all their colleagues.
- Small changes in language and approaches to family engagement can make a big difference.
 - Tell fathers that their participation is valued and welcomed.
 - Address fathers by their name and ask about their availability and schedule to participate in services.
 - If mom answers the phone on the initial call, be clear that you want to schedule an appointment with her and the father.
 - If dad answers the phone, don't ask to speak to the mother; instead, talk with him just as you would the mother.



FOUR KEY PRINCIPLES OF FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN HOME VISITING SERVICES

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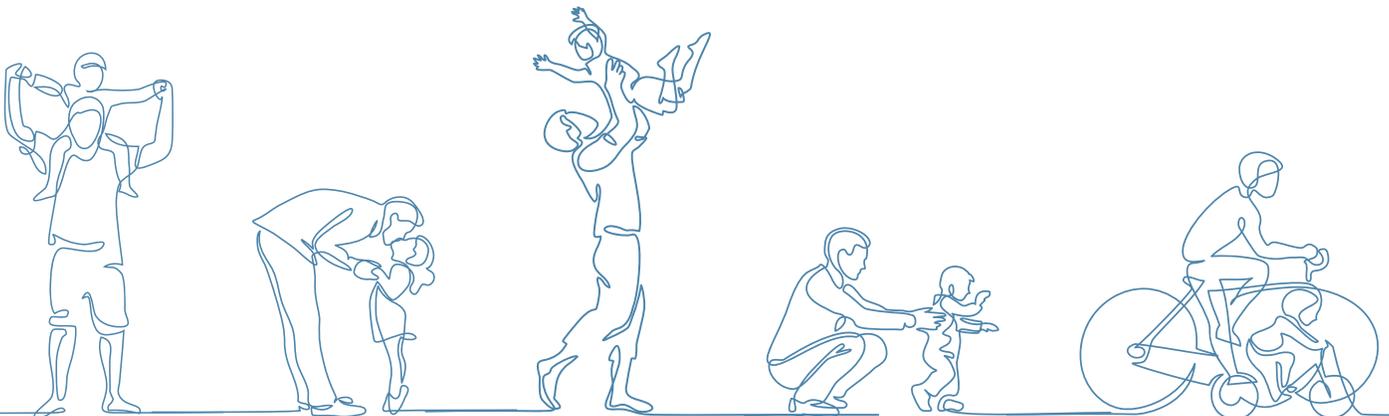
Continuously seek to engage fathers.

- Engaging fathers in home visiting services is not a “one and done” process.
 - Fathers, particularly low-income fathers, may have had bad experiences in previous parenting programs or other social services, which can be a barrier to participation in home visiting.
 - They may assume that parenting services are not for them.
- If initial engagement strategies do not work well, be prepared to try different approaches. (See *Home Visitor Strategies* section for specific suggestions.)
 - Successful father engagement requires persistence and flexibility.
- Home visiting staff can be trained on essential father engagement strategies, but they should also be encouraged to learn what works best for each father.
 - Father engagement success is based on the home visitor’s ability to form a positive relationship with fathers and be consistent and creative in their efforts to engage them (Bellamy et al, 2020).

4

Use agency leadership to reinforce the culture of father engagement.

- Agency leaders, including administrators and supervisors, must set the tone and elevate the importance of engaging fathers.
- Ways to demonstrate that father engagement is an agency priority include:
 - Requiring all staff to participate in father engagement training when they are hired.
 - Providing ongoing refresher trainings to staff.
 - Ensuring that all staff receive supervision and opportunities to discuss what is working, and what is not working, to engage fathers.
 - Conducting regular case review practices to ensure that father engagement is prioritized in intake and assessment procedures and during all steps of service provision.
 - Collecting, analyzing, and sharing data with staff and the public on father engagement efforts and outcomes.



IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES⁴

With the four key principles in mind, here are some strategies that can help home visiting programs engage fathers. These, or similar strategies, can be adopted at every level of an organization and at each stage of services.

PROGRAM AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

1 ENSURE THAT ALL FORMS OF COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES ADDRESS BOTH PARENTS.

- If mothers' names and contact information are the only information available, staff should reach out to collect contact information for the fathers as well.

2 GATHER INFORMATION FROM BOTH PARENTS. THIS INCLUDES ASSESSMENT TOOLS, CONTACT LOGS, AND GOAL-SETTING FORMS.

- Even forms that are more geared to mothers, such as perinatal depression questionnaires, can be modified. Asking fathers to complete these forms can help them be more aware of their own perinatal mental health and the mothers' mental health and well-being.

3 ANALYZE THE FATHER-FRIENDLINESS OF PROGRAM MATERIALS AND THE SERVICE ENVIRONMENT.

- What messages might brochures distributed in the community, websites describing the program, and other communication materials convey to fathers?
- Pay attention to the diversity of the families depicted.
 - Do images displayed in brochures or posters represent all types of families in the community?
 - Do they include fathers of color, same sex fathers, and fathers who speak languages other than English?
- Most home visiting services naturally take place in the home, but parents will occasionally come to a program center for individual meetings or group activities, so it is important that all physical spaces and visual cues are welcoming to mothers and fathers.
 - Is the space welcoming to fathers?
 - What messages might paint colors, posters, artwork on the walls, or other physical cues within the agency convey about the inclusion of fathers?

⁴The strategies presented here draw on findings from Bellamy et al, 2020, and the author's experience in developing the Dads Matter-HV intervention, which included a review of the broader literature describing father engagement strategies in child and family service systems.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

HOME VISITOR STRATEGIES⁵

Use direct and intentional communication strategies with fathers.

1 BE SPECIFIC ABOUT INVITING FATHERS TO PARTICIPATE IN HOME VISITING SERVICES.

- A father may assume that home visiting services are not for him, or he may try to “stay out of the way” during a visit by watching TV in another room or offering to watch the baby while mom participates. Be clear that you expect him to join in.

2 HIGHLIGHT THE BENEFIT OF FATHERS’ PARTICIPATION FOR THEIR FAMILY’S WELL-BEING.

- Share information on benefits for fathers and families. For examples, see National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (2018b) and Sandstrom & Lauderback (2019).
- Prepare father-specific information packets to share with fathers.

3 EXPLAIN SERVICES CLEARLY SO FATHERS KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT.

- If fathers have never participated in child and family services or have had negative experiences with other services, take the opportunity to demystify home visiting and help alleviate potential anxieties or misperceptions.

4 MAKE EYE CONTACT DURING HOME VISITS AND ALL IN-PERSON CONVERSATIONS.

- Fathers often describe how service providers ask questions while looking at mothers, which cues mothers to lead and fathers to stay silent.

5 TALK DIRECTLY TO FATHERS.

- Some home visitors are surprised to realize how often they direct their conversation to mothers only or mothers first.

6 IF A FATHER MISSES A HOME VISITING SESSION:

- Leave a book he can read to his child.
- Have a packet ready with information, activities, or other information that was covered during the visit.
- Leave a note indicating that you missed him and hope he can be there for the next visit.
- Text or call him to find out how you can make it easier for him to participate or be there next time.

⁵The strategies presented in this section were described as successful by home visitors who participated in a father-engagement training session. The home visitors discussed ways in which they had effectively applied these father-engagement principles in their practice (Bellamy et al, 2020).

WORK TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH FATHERS OVER TIME

1 BE CONSISTENT. IT TAKES MORE THAN JUST ONE ATTEMPT TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP.

- If a father is not immediately responsive or doesn't participate right away, keep trying.
- Continuously offer support, be welcoming, thank fathers for participating in visits, and always ask if you can do anything more to help.

2 PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FATHERS TO INTERACT WITH OTHER DADS. SOME FATHERS MAY FEEL LIKE THEY ARE THE ONLY ONES STRUGGLING WITH PARENTING OR PARTICIPATING IN HOME VISITING SERVICES.

- Organize father-only group sessions or family-focused events where dads can meet other dads informally.
- Host toy-building workshops, story time, Father's Day celebrations, sports or field days, or other activities to provide opportunities for fathers to meet each other.
- Organize father mentoring or peer-support opportunities to connect fathers with one another on a more ongoing basis.
- Check your local area for fatherhood programs and build a relationship with them so you can confidently refer dads, particularly non-residential fathers.

3 RESPECT THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE OF FATHERS.

- All new parents (fathers and mothers) start their parenting journey with varying levels of knowledge, expertise, and experience.
- Start by exploring what a father already knows and does for his child. Identify and build on strengths rather than immediately focusing on deficits and needs in parenting.

4 ENCOURAGE MOTHERS TO SHARE INFORMATION ON HOW IMPORTANT FATHERS ARE IN THE LIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN.

- Mothers have a strong influence on fathers' roles in the family and their perception of themselves as parents. Don't assume that a mother does, or does not, want the father involved in home visits. In fact, you may need to work with her to help her understand the benefits of father involvement.

5 EXPLAIN HOW PARENTS CAN BENEFIT BY PROVIDING EACH OTHER WITH MUTUAL SUPPORT.

- Help mothers and fathers focus on what they share in common. **Nearly all parents can agree that they want the best for their child.**
- Help parents work together and understand the importance of their coparenting relationship for their child, especially if they are not in a romantic relationship or do not get along.
- Offer them tips on successful coparenting. (You could refer them to [Coparenting Tips for Dads](#), a tip sheet from the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2020.)

BUILD FLEXIBLE AND INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

1 CONSIDER AND WORK WITH FATHERS' SCHEDULES.

- Parents may trade off child care responsibilities and stagger their work schedules, which would prevent them both from participating in home visits during “typical” service hours.
- It may be necessary to meet on evenings, weekends, or have a visit schedule that shifts or moves depending on the week.

2 USE TECHNOLOGY, SUCH AS SPEAKER PHONES, FACETIME, OR ZOOM, WHEN NECESSARY.

- A variety of reasons—geographic distance, poor relationships, work schedules—may make it hard to schedule visits when both parents can attend in person. Use virtual technology to include the parent who cannot be there in person.

3 MAINTAIN A LIST OF SERVICES THAT YOU CAN REFER FATHERS TO IF THEY INDICATE THEY NEED EXTRA SUPPORT.

- Some typically needed services include job training; educational opportunities; fatherhood programs; or male-friendly health, mental health, and social services.

4 ENGAGE FATHERS IN HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES.

- Some men prefer learning by doing and may be less comfortable or engaged by talking or didactic teaching.
- Actively engage fathers in child development assessments, breastfeeding support, or childproofing the home.

BENEFITS FOR FATHERS WHO PARTICIPATE IN HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

Fathers who engage in home visiting programs have indicated that they value the services provided by home visitors and regard them as trusted sources of information.

Fathers have reported positive outcomes such as:

- ✓ Increased knowledge of child development and positive parenting practices.
- ✓ Enhanced ability to understand and use anger management skills.
- ✓ Improved communication with their coparents.
- ✓ More connections to employment, educational opportunities, and other community services and resources.

They attribute these positive outcomes to:

- ✓ Support and information received from home visitors.
- ✓ Peer support from other fathers and male program staff.

(Sandstrom & Lauderback, 2019)

HELPFUL RESOURCES

No one strategy will work with all fathers. But, if home visiting programs can organize their efforts to engage fathers around the principles and strategies described in this brief, they can expect to see an increase in father participation in home visiting services, which in turn increases the likelihood of improved mother and child well-being (Bellamy et al, 2020).

CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

[Tips to create a father-friendly organization](#)

INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH ON POVERTY

[Strategies for engaging fathers in family services](#)

NATIONAL HOME VISITING RESOURCE CENTER

[Father engagement in home visiting: Benefits, challenges, and promising strategies](#)

PARENTS AS TEACHERS

[Fatherhood Toolkit](#)

URBAN INSTITUTE

[Engaging Low-Income Fathers in Home Visiting: Approaches, Challenges, and Strategies](#)



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National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

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