

Engaging Fathers in the Home Visiting Model

By Deb Meiklejohn



Parents as Teachers™

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We use the Parents as Teachers Model, conducting monthly home visits with families who have children from birth to age 3. We had some success engaging fathers with the support groups and the Conscious Fathering™ Program, but the Parents as Teachers home visits had the biggest impact.

Successes

We made sure that the home visitors were able to be flexible in their scheduling so they could schedule the home visits when the fathers were available. Before we received the grant for the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Community Access Program, we would schedule the visits within the parent educator's (home visitor's) schedule. When we would go on a visit and there were handouts that were important for dad to see, we would say, "Make sure you share these with dad," so that meant the information always went through mom. With the intention of getting dads more involved, we had to be much more flexible in offering evening and Saturday visits so we could be sure the father was going to be there. We also made sure dad was available, and if mom was there, then that was the best scenario – but we wanted to make sure the dad was engaged.

From the home visitors' perspectives, it was exciting to see how engaged the dads were in these visits and how likely they were to participate in the follow-up activities that were suggested by the home visitor. If we left activities to do or to expand on, dads were really eager to do them. They really enjoyed seeing their children engaged in the activities and seeing what they were capable of doing. A lot of the dads would remark, "I didn't know he could do that." They were so impressed with their children's skills that it was fun for them to see how their child was developing as we pointed out things that sometimes parents take for granted because they see their child every day. When you bring it to their attention and say, "See that, see the thing they just did, that's a whole new skill," it's really an exciting thing.

It did not take any time at all for the dads to participate. Right off the bat they were engaged. As soon as we made home visiting more available to them, they got right into it. We brought them into the home visit as a partner in what we were doing and not an observer. Also, we encouraged dads to be engaged with their child in whatever we were doing on the particular day.



Challenges

There were a few challenges with this new intention of engaging dads. For instance, we had to first get the staff members of the different programs to realize that they had to branch out a little bit and be more flexible with their schedule. Asking people to be that flexible when you're talking about evenings and Saturdays was difficult at first. With our participants, there was the initial challenge



of scheduling the visit through mom. Moms would usually say things like, “Oh no, 3 o’clock is good because that’s when they get up from their nap, and that’s a good time,” but we would have to say, “No, we would really like you both there, so we will work with you to pick a better time.” We needed to convince some moms that we needed dad there as well.

We also found that because our Parents as Teachers program was already in existence, this was a little bit of a change for some families who were used to the visits only involving mom and the children. If it was a family we were already working with, we needed to say, “It is very important that we bring dad in.” It was much easier to initiate this with new families because dad was asked to be involved from the beginning.

Lastly, we noticed that because it was usually a mom who enrolled the family in the program, mom was the initial contact. We addressed all mail to the mother, and when we called the house, we asked for mom. We stopped to take a look at that and said, “It’s not just mom; we’re enrolling the family. Why are we sending the mail to mom?” So the program actually looked at its mailing list and if we didn’t have dad’s name on that envelope, we included it. We changed all of our electronic distribution lists and dad was included as a contact.

Tip from the Field **Father-friendly assessment**

“The father-friendly assessment was helpful because it was a way for us to identify areas where we had some strengths and areas where we had some weaknesses. It also brought things to our attention that in the course of our day we wouldn’t notice. For example, we looked around the room at our décor. We had to ask ourselves, “Is it friendly to fathers or is it just attractive to mothers?” We took that for granted and, with a staff of all women, we might not have stopped and said, “Oh, you know, this room might not appeal to dads.”

We really made sure posters and decorations we had on the wall reflected moms and dads and all types of families. Even though we are making sure that we are father friendly, we really want to be family friendly at the same time.

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Lessons learned

The best evidence of our success is related to sustainability. We used the funds to provide technical assistance statewide to all home visitors, and not just those directly impacted by the project. These home visitors have now imbedded the importance of fathers into their day-to-day work, which has changed the way we operate. It also increased our capacity to positively impact more families.



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Deb Meiklejohn is the director of the Rhode Island Parental Information Resource Center and director of the MegaSkills Education Center at RI Parent Information Network. She was first certified as a Parents as Teachers parent educator/coordinator in 1993, and she has been the RI State Leader for Parents as Teachers for the past five years. She's worked in family engagement for more than 20 years. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and is a certified teacher in Rhode Island.

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