The Effect of Sent Home Activities on Parental Involvement

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**Abstract**

Current literature suggests that low socioeconomic status (SES) has an effect on educational success. Early childhood development of school readiness skills are no exception to this correlate (Kingston, Huang, Calzada, Dawson, & Brotman, 2013). Research has been collected on how parental involvement can mitigate the correlation between low SES and educational disadvantages in children (Kingston et al., 2013). However, limited research has been collected on the effectiveness of take-home activities in encouraging more parental involvement. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of take home activities in increasing parental involvement. Families enrolled in a Head Start program were used as the population for this research study. The sample population consisted of 44 participating families in three programs located in rural Virginia. The data from this research was collected through surveys. These surveys provided quantitative data through close-ended questions and matrix questions. They also provided qualitative data through open-ended questions, making this a mixed methods study. The common themes found in the open-ended questions were the activities’ effectiveness at encouraging more parental involvement, greater parental involvement as defined by working together and spending time together, barriers to involvement, and things the participants would change about the activities. Statistical findings within this research state that there is no correlation between the respondents’ weekly work schedule and the amount of time they spend with their child. However, the data does suggest that there is a positive correlation between educational attainment and the quality of the parent-child relationship. The findings from this study imply that sent home activities effectively increase the amount of parental involvement within a household, however more research needs to be done when addressing the barriers of involvement.

**Introduction**

An individual’s socioeconomic status (SES) greatly effects their ability to achieve in life. This is seen when looking at the correlation between low SES and disadvantages in early educational skills (Kingston, Huang, Calzada, Dawson, & Brotman, 2013). Studies have shown that increased parental involvement can mitigate the educational disadvantages faced by individuals of low SES (Barnes, Guin, Allen, & Jolly, 2016). Studies have also shown the effectiveness of organizations, such as Head Start, in increasing these individuals’ abilities to succeed in an educational setting (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; Lamb-Parkera, Piotrkowskib, Bakerc, Kessler-Sklar, Clark, Peay, 2001). However, there is limited research on ways to encourage greater parental involvement. With this information arises the question, “Will sent home activities encourage parental involvement with children ages three to five enrolled in a Head start program?” It is hypothesized that a combination of government programs, such as Head Start, and the implementation of parental involvement through sent home activities could reduce the correlation between low SES and low academic achievement. This mixed methods study analyzes the qualitative and quantitative data from surveys administered to 44 families enrolled in a Head Start program. The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of sent home activities in increasing parental involvement, and subsequently increasing the child’s likelihood to succeed academically.

**Literature Review**

Current research suggests that parental involvement is an influential factor in a child’s development and success in school. Current research also suggests that children from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds face more difficulties in the development of school readiness skills (Kingston, Huang, Calzada, Dawson, & Brotman, 2013). Government programs, like Head Start, have been put in place to assist children from low SES backgrounds in preparing for school by encouraging parental involvement. (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; Lamb-Parkera, Piotrkowskib, Bakerc, Kessler-Sklar, Clark, Peay, 2001).

**Benefits of Parental Involvement**

According to a study conducted by Kingston et al., (2013), “parent involvement moderated the effect of family and neighborhood socioeconomic resources on the social‐emotional‐behavioral components of school readiness”. An increase in parental involvement was concluded to have an inverse correlation with the amount of behavioral issues in the children studied. The researches chose 171 four-year-old children to see if parent involvement moderates the effects of low SES, the data was collected through parent interviews, teacher reports, and standardized tests on school readiness (Kingston et al., 2013). From the qualitative study of fourteen childcare providers and the data, they collected from interviews, researchers Barnes, Guin, Allen, and Jolly (2016) found that, “Parent involvement leads to improved attendance and higher academic achievement”. The Head Start program is a “two generational program” meaning the providers not only educate the children, but also education the parents on proper parental techniques. This is a crucial aspect of Head Start considering that studies support the notion that support must be provided at home, as well as these programs, for them to maximize the likelihood of the child’s academic success (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016).

**Barriers to Parental Involvement**

The parents who enroll their children in the Head Start program all experience the disadvantages of low SES. These disadvantages may attribute to some of the barriers parents face when tasked with parental involvement. Research found that a major barrier is that the educator’s expectations do not take the parent’s time, finances, or culture into consideration (Barnes et al., 2016). A study conducted by Mendez (2010) used a sample size of 288 families enrolled in Head Start to participate in a qualitative study about the barriers faced by low SES parents. This data was collected by standardized interviews administered to the parents and the beginning and end of the school year. Similarly, the educator rated the children’s behavior at these times as well. According to the data collected by Mendez (2010), “There is…evidence to suggest that parents with higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower family income were unable to access the enhanced services offered within Head Start”. Qualitative data collected through surveys on the barriers to parental involvement were collected and Lamb-Parker et al., (2001) found that a major barrier, in addition to work schedule conflicts, is the need to care for other children at home.

There have been many studies on the effectiveness of parental involvement in early child success. There has also been substantial research to back the idea that low SES makes children competitively disadvantaged in the world of academia. Therefore, one can conclude that parental involvement mitigates some of these disadvantages faced by students of low SES backgrounds (Kingston et al., 2013). Some researchers believe that parent-teacher communication and communication training is an effective way to increase parental involvement (Barnes et al., 2016; Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). However, there is limited research on take home activities that could encourage the increase of parental involvement at home. With the data collected by researchers Lamb-Parker et al., (2001) and Mendez (2010) about the barriers to involvement, one can conclude that these activities must not be time consuming, expensive, or exclusive to one’s living situation. With the information from prior research, new data could be collected on how to effectively administer activities that encourage an increase in positive parental involvement. These activities could overcome some of the common barriers found in prior research and effectively mediate the relationship between low SES and academic underachievement.

**Data and Methods**

**Study Design and Sample**

The population we chose to evaluate was families with children enrolled in a Head Start program. The sample size consisted of 86 low income families enrolled Head Start located in three rural southern Virginia counties. The overall response rate was 51.2%. The goal of this evaluation research was to see if sent home activities encouraged a greater amount of parental involvement within the sample size. This research used quantitative and qualitative data collected from surveys that were sent to the sample population. An activity was sent home with a child every day for five days. At the end of this, the Head Start employees gave the surveys in which we created to the children, these surveys were then collected, and recorded for a descriptive analysis of the data from these surveys that were completed by the participants. The surveys would provide both qualitative data from the open-ended questions and quantitative data from matrix and close-ended questions, making this a mixed methods research.

**Procedure**

We placed a question at the top of the survey, affirming the participants’ consent. This question also guaranteed the patients’ anonymity. We used attached a $5 gift card to the surveys, in an attempt to incentivize higher rates of participation. These pen and paper surveys were administered to the children of the participants on the final day, along with the final activity. Upon the completion of the survey, they were returned to Head Start and given to us to examine the data.

**Quantitative Measures**

The quantitative data in this experiment was recorded from the close-ended questions on the survey. Primarily the matrix questions were used to record numerical data that was usually based on a scale between zero and ten; on a scale from 0-10, how much did your family enjoy this activity? (0=Not at all, 10= Very much). These questions not only addressed the research question, but also gave us numerical data to graph. The independent variables in this experiment were the parents’ education and schedules as well as the activities’ ability to encourage more family involvement. The dependent variable was the amount of parental involvement within the samples’ household. These variables were chosen because they directly addressed the research question, “Will sent home activities encourage parental involvement with children ages three to five enrolled in a Head start program?” Some quantitative questions that addressed the independent variables were; what is the highest level of education anyone in your household has completed? During a typical day, how many hours do you spend interacting with your child/children? (0-10 or more scale). During a typical week, how many hours do you work?

**Qualitative Measures**

The participants of the study were the guardians of the children, ages 3 to 5 who were enrolled in a Head Start program located in three counties in rural southern Virginia. After all the activities were administered, we collected the completed surveys and recorded the open-ended questions. These questions asked about the participants’ schedules, as well as the effectiveness of the administered activities. The open-ended questions from the survey that the participants took provided us with qualitative data. The qualitative data was recorded with a case-oriented analysis to better understand some of the barriers of involvement these parents face and why they face them. These qualitative questions were; do you think that being provided with pre-planned activities increased the amount of fun time you got to spend with your family after school? Please explain what your family gained from these activities. How will you use what you gained in the future? If you had to change at least one thing about these activities for future use, what would it be?

**Analysis**

*Quantitative Analysis*

We use the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences issue 25 (SPSS) database to examine survey responses. Descriptive statistics were recorded.

*Qualitative Analysis*

Open-ended data was used to explore themes related to family involvement. We coded our qualitative data for reoccurring themes.

**Quantitative Findings**

The close-ended questions in the survey distributed to the sample population were used to collect quantitative data. This data was used to find a correlation between the independent variables; the parents’ educational attainment and the parents’ schedule, and the dependent variable; the amount of parental involvement within a household. The amount of parental involvement was measured both by quantity (hours) and quality (relationship). The first matrix question asked, “During a typical day, how many hours do you get to spend interacting with your child/children?” This question allowed us to find the quantity of time in which the parents in the sample population spent with their children. Table 1 shows the amount of time the parents within the sample population spent interacting with their children each day, with the average time being 5.9 hours.

Table 1

*Hours of Parent-Child Interaction a Day*

Time (hours) Count %

0-3 3 9.1%

4-7 2266.7%

8-10 (or more) 8 24.2%

Total 33 100%

*Note.* The question ranged between 1-10 or more, for statistical purposes three major ranges were used to record the data.

The second matrix question was used to better understand the quality of the relationships between the parents and their children. The question asked, “How would you rate your current relationship with your child/children?” Table 2 shows the positive relationship between the parents within the sample and their children (0-10, 0=mostly negative, 10=mostly positive). The average response was 9.6.

Table 2

*Parental Relationship with Child*

Relationship Count %

7 1 2.9%

8 3 8.6%

9 4 11.4%

10 27 77.1%

Total 35 100%

*Note.* No respondents chose the answers 0-6.

The independent variables were the participants’ schedules and educational attainments. To get a better understanding of the sample population’s educational background, a multiple choice question was placed on the survey asking, “What is the highest level of education anyone in your household has completed?” The answers to this question ranged from “less than high school” to “Master’s degree or more.” The median response was “some college or associate’s degree” with 15/34 or 44.1% of respondents choosing this category. The question, “During a typical week, how many hours do you work?” was used to get an accurate idea of each respondent’s schedule. The average hours the sample population worked a week was 31.3 hours. Table 3 shows the range of which parents within the sample population work per week.

Table 3

*Hours of Work (Per Week)*

Hours (Per Week) Count %

0-10 4 14.3%

11-20 2 7.1%

21-30 6 21.4%

31 or more 16 57.1%

Total 28 100%

­­­­­­­­­­­*Note.* The questions required the respondents to write in their answers, from those answers four main ranges were chosen to report the data.

The independent variable, hours of work per week, and the dependent variable, amount of parent-child involvement a day (in hours) were both assessed to find a correlation between the two variables. Table 4 shows the correlation between the participants’ work schedules and their interaction time with their children. In this table, the independent variable was split into two categories; those who work 20 hours or less and those who work 21 hours or more a week. The dependent variable was split into two categories as well; parents who spend five hours or less per day with their child and parents who spend six hours or more per day with their child. Table 5 shows the relationship between the second independent variable, educational attainment, and the dependent variable, which is the quality of the relationship between the parent and the child. The independent variable was split into two categories; those who achieved a high school degree (GED) or less, and those who have attained at least some higher degree of education. The dependent variable was split into two categories as well; those who rated their relationship with their child 7-8 out of 10 and those who rated their relationship 9-10.

Table 4

*Work Schedule’s Effect on Involvement*

*­*­Work Schedule

Hours of involvement 0-20 21-more

0-5 50% 50%

6 or more 50% 50%

Total 100% 100%

*Note.* 20/26 respondents worked 21 hours or more a week and 6 worked between 0-20 hours.

Table 5

*Education’s Effect on Parent-Child Relationship*

Education

Relationship GED or less some college or more

7-8 16.7% 9.1%

9-10 83.3% 90.9%

Total 100% 100%

­­­­­­­­­­­­­*Note.* No participants chose 0-6 for their relationship.

These findings suggest there is no correlation between the participants’ work schedules and the amount of time spent with their child. The data is distributed evenly, showing no correlate between this independent and dependent variable. This suggests that there must be another variable that effects the participants’ interaction time with their children. The data suggests there is a correlation between educational attainment and one’s relationship with their child. Individuals who pursued a degree of higher education were on average 7.6% more likely to have a more positive relationship with their child.

**Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative data collected for this study was from the open-ended questions found on the administered survey. From these answers arose four reoccurring themes. These themes were the activities’ ability to increase parental involvement, involvement as being defined as an increase quality time and teamwork, things the respondents would change about the activities, and barriers to more parental involvement experienced by the respondents. These reoccurring themes helped support the research question, “will sent home activities encourage more parental involvement in parents with children, ages three to five, enrolled in a Head Start program?”

The first theme, the ability of the activities to increase familial involvement, can be seen in the surveys of 29 out of 35 respondents. Some individuals, like Respondent 18, claimed that these activities allowed for the whole family to become involved, stating “everyone wanted to participate and help”. The respondents who stated that the activities did not increase familial involvement did so by stating that they are already greatly involved with their children. When asked if these activities increased the amount of “family fun time” Respondent 12 stated, “Not necessarily, we always ensure there’s time to spend with family.” However, most of the individuals who found the activities increased familial involvement.

Some of the respondents went on to explain the barriers they face regarding involvement with their child. Respondent 13 claimed that a lack of transportation is a barrier they experience. When asking this respondent if the sent home activities were successful in increasing “family fun time” they responded, “yes, because I didn’t have to look for things to do or go to the store to buy supplies. I don’t have transportation.” This is a valuable finding because it explains how some individuals are limited with their involvement due to their lack of access to transportation. Respondent 10 explained that a busy schedule is a barrier to familial involvement and the sent home activities were helpful because they have “been a busy [parent] of two [and] it’s hard to come home and think of something to do.” These responses give more insight into why parental involvement may be difficult for some families to achieve.

A common trend that can be seen by the responses are that “quality time” and “working together” are two major aspects of the involvement these activities generated. Several respondents remarked about how the activities allowed the members of their families become better at “working together [and] [having] family time” (respondent 17). Respondent 13 explained that these activities brought the family together creating teamwork to achieve a common goal, “we were working together doing these activities: my brother, me, and my son.” Respondent 8 states “[the activities] had us spending more time together by looking up more things to do as a family,” this exemplifies how these activities can open a door to the continuation of positive familial involvement through quality time and corroboration. Both aspects are vital to the early success of a child in a household setting.

The fourth and final reoccurring trend is things that respondents would change about the activities that were administered. Five out of the 19 respondents provided feedback. These changes were normally advice on what to keep in mind when deciding on activities. When asked what should be done differently, Respondent 6 stated they would “like more activities about learning to write and hold a pencil correctly.” Respondent 5 explained in their response that when considering future activities, one should “be mindful that kids [this] age like to put things in [their] mouth.” This feedback is important when deciding on future activities that will effectively encourage more familial involvement.

The qualitative findings from these surveys not only address the research question but provide insight into what aspects of involvement are commonly experienced when given these activities. This qualitative data also allows one to record information that was not asked in the survey, for example common barriers to involvement families face. This data can help future research. Finally, the answers given by the respondents when asked if they would change anything about the activities allows for future research tailor the activities appropriately.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this study can be used to lessen the educational disadvantages faced by individuals from a low SES background. It is known that low SES individuals struggle to compete in an academic setting. It is also known that parental involvement can increase a child’s likelihood of success in school. The mixed methods findings from the administered surveys were used to assess the ability of sent home activities to increase parental involvement. The qualitative answers recorded from the surveys explained that the activities were effective in increasing family involvement. When asked, the majority of the respondents defined family or parental involvement as quality time and teamwork. The quantitative findings from the questions on the survey better explain why low SES families face barriers to parental involvement. No correlation was found between hours of work per week and hours of parent-child interaction. This indicates that the amount of interaction between parent and child is influenced by variables that were not taken into account. However, a correlation was found between educational attainment and the quality of parent-child relationships. The research shows that parents who achieved a higher level of education on average have a better relationship with their child. The implications of this study are important when addressing the disparity in academic success between the different SES backgrounds and when attempting to mitigate this disparity. The limitations faced when conducting this research were the validity of the participants’ answers to the survey questions and the amount of time for the researchers to collect data. Future research should interview participants before the activities are administered to better understand the barriers to involvement.

**References**

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