Parental Involvement: How It Affects Child Engagement in Head Start

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Abstract

Parental involvement is a concept that has been examined in consideration with other factors such as child development. In particular, previous research has shown a positive correlation with high parental involvement and child engagement in academics. In this study, we examined how parental involvement affects how children’s effort in learning at the local Head Start program in three counties. Based on the response rate, the majority of the participants enjoyed the activities and the children successfully learned to complete them. The results indicated that parental involvement has a significantly positive effect on the child’s engagement and learning. It is also shown that our results supported the finding of the previous research discussed.

Keywords: parental involvement, child engagement, academic achievement, Head Start

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The concept of parental involvement has been emphasized in society as a key to proper development in children. Several research studies have been conducted on parental involvement and how it affects various categories of a child’s life. The findings of these studies highlight the significance of parental involvement in various types of child engagement. In this paper, the response of parental involvement in different at-home activities with children ages 3-5 years were examined to find relationships with academic achievement.

**Parental Involvement**

The definition of parental involvement varies across each piece of literature; however, it is a concept seen as highly effective in children engagement. The current literature mostly defines parental involvement as engaging in activities inside and outside the home, such as academics (Wong et al., 2018). Some forms of parental involvement may include proper supervision, effective communication, and encouraging skill development with their children (Pakulak et al., 2017). These forms of engagement between parents and children may have positive or negative correlations on child attributes. While parental involvement does not have one precise definition, it can be studied and measured in diverse factors.

**Family Structure and Economic Status**

Parental involvement studies should consider the influence of family structure and economic status as previous research suggests notable differences between nuclear families and families with single/divorced or remarried parents. According to Carlson and Berger (2013), single-mother or father families spend relatively less time with their children than two-parent families. While much of this study is focused on family structure, household income was also accounted to examine any possible relationships. In comparison, the martial and residential status of the biological parents may also affect parent-child engagement (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006).

The methodology of the research conducted by Hawkins, Amato, and King (2006) measured how parent-child involvement in shared activities affected relationship quality. The results suggested families with married, biological parents living in the same residence have high levels of satisfaction in their relationships with their children than families with separated or single parents (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006). While the sample was representative of children in grades 7 through 12, the study was limited in regards to only including biological parent and child relationships. In contrast, the methodology of Carlson and Berger (2013) focused on parental involvement of children ages 1, 3, and 5 years old and if socioeconomic status affected the level of parent-child engagement. Overall, the results demonstrated that married parents, of any income level, are more involved with their children than other family structures (Carlson & Berger, 2013). Despite being a cross-sectional study, the limitations of various family types and frequency of parent-child interaction may affect the accuracy of the results. These pieces of literature give the indication that parental involvement can be broken down in terms of measurement as family structure and economic status varies across a relatively wide spectrum.

**Academic Development**

Another important consideration in parental involvement research involves the child’s academic performance. Previous research has demonstrated a strong correlation between parental involvement and academic success in children of different age groups. One example examines how factors associated with parental engagement, such as using school resources, have a relationship with their child’s academic achievements (Houtenville & Conway, 2008). In contrast, according to McNeal (1999), parental involvement can be conceptualized as a social capital; in which involves the elements of obligation norms, reciprocity, and degree of resources. This research analyzes how parental involvement affects student academic success as well as truancy (McNeal, 1999). Similarly, the question of too much parental involvement has been examined to find any possible correlations to hindering academic as well as psychosocial development (Wong et al., 2017).

The methodology of the study conducted by Houtenville and Conway (2008) pursued the association between parental involvement and student achievement on the use of school resources, such as engaging with the child’s teachers. The results of their surveys suggested that parents that reported being highly involved in their child’s academics as well as school resources were performing better academically than those that were not (Houtenville & Conway, 2008). However, the data has limitations in regards to the children’s past academic achievements and school resource constraints which may have some relation. In distinction, McNeal’s (1999) methodology consisted of sampling eighth through twelfth grade students to find patterns of parental involvement in both academic success and dropping out of school. The statistics showed significantly similar outcomes in which higher rates of parent involvement had a positive correlation to excelled academic achievement and truancy (McNeal, 1999). Many limitations are present in this research, including parent-child relationship and quality of school program, in which has likelihood of affecting accuracy in the data. Similar variables studied by Wong et al. (2017) investigated how excessive parental involvement affect their children’s academic and psychosocial attributes. The survey results of both the parents and children sampled in the research suggested high parental involvement at home and school had positively associated with children’s academic competence as well as psychosocial wellbeing (Wong et al., 2017). However, like the Houtenville and Conway (2008) study, there were limitations of disregarding previous academic performance and parent-child relationship. The research presented in this literature provides the implication that parent engagement has a significant repercussion on children’s academic success in which may affect other contributing factors.

# Data and Methods

## Study Design and Sample

This study originated from the need to discover how parental involvement affects children’s engagement in academics. The research was conducted at the Head Start programs in three neighboring counties of rural Virginia. The participants were 86 low-income families with children ages 3-5 years old. A mixed-method approach was used in order to explore an understanding of the quantitative and qualitative findings.

Procedure

The participants completed a pen and paper questionnaire in which were given by Head Start administration along with the first activity sent home. All participants gave written consent to be human subjects on the surveys as adhered to the Institutional Board Review at Longwood University. Each questionnaire had an attached $5 superstore gift card for the participants as an incentive for being a part of the study. The completed surveys were returned at the end of the week after all the activities were distributed and finished. Overall, 35 out of 85 survey responses were received. Some barriers of non-responses could be lack of time, inability to understand the questions, or simply forgot to return them.

Quantitative and Qualitative Measures

In order to study quantitative measures for parental involvement, a series of multiple-choice and scale questions were asked for each activity. These questions were used to discover if the child/children completed the activities, if the parent helped the child/children, and the child/children’s and parent’s levels of enjoyment. Some examples of the close-ended questions included: *Was the activity effective in engaging your child/children? Yes, No, or Unsure*. All the responses were entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 25 database for statistical analysis.

In order to study qualitative measures for parental involvement, a total of four open-ended questions were listed at the beginning of the survey. These questions were created to discover what the parents gained from doing the activities with their child/children and provide feedback to improve future studies. The open-ended questions in the survey included: *What was your favorite activity and why? Please explain what your family gained from these activities. How will you use what you gained in the future? 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? If you had to change at least one thing about these activities for future use, what would it be?* The written responses were analyzed using qualitative analyses in a Microsoft Excel document.

**Analysis**

All of the responses were categorized by the type of question, such as open-ended or close-ended. The data was then analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 25 database. Descriptive statistics were used for the findings of quantitative data while the individual responses to the open-ended questions were used for qualitative analyses which include finding relationships between the responses.

**Results**

**Quantitative Findings**

When examining the effects of parental involvement on child academic success, the results show a positive relationship. Based on the survey results (n=35), about 74% of the respondents stated that their child correctly identified the three colors used in the Noodle Necklace activity as shown in *Table 1*. Also, the parental subjects reported that about 48% enjoyed the activity on the highest rate on a scale of 0-10 as shown in *Table 2*. If the means are compared for both variables, it is highest on three colors identified and rating of 10 level of family enjoyment as seen in *Table 3*.

**Qualitative Findings**

After reviewing the responses of the open-ended survey questions, the majority stated that their families gained more time together and found the activities educational; as suggested in the quotes below.

Our family was able to bond. We learned that we can learn and have fun at the same time (Respondent 5).

We got to spend time all together and enjoyed the games, it was some education, and fun (Respondent 25).

My kids really enjoyed the animal dice activity. They learned some new animal sounds (Respondent 28).

Although the responses of the activities were highly positive in that regard, there were some suggestions in how the study can be improved in the future.

I would like more activities about learning to write and how to hold a pencil correctly (Respondent 6).

Something not as heavy for the animal dice (Respondent 11).

Noodle Necklace could have come with a plastic stringing needle or something more stiff than yarn. She lacked the fine motor skills to fight the yarn—she is only 3 (Respondent 20).

As previously stated, the responses were mostly positive for the enjoyment of the activities and ability to engage with the children. In addition, the constructive criticism will allow researchers to continue this study and discover more knowledge about the effects of parental involvement and child engagement.

**Discussion**

The results of this study support the previous research discussed in the literature review as well as my hypothesis; in which high levels of parental involvement positively affect children’s engagement in academics. As discussed in the research conducted by Houtenville and Conway (2008), families who were more involved with the children’s’ learning had higher rates of academic success than those who were not. Our results suggest that parental involvement made a significant impact on the child’s engagement and willingness to learn.

Despite the positive responses, there were some limitations to this study. Since we only received 35 responses out of the 85 surveys distributed, over 50% of our data is missing and unaccounted. It should also be noted that our sampling was convenient due to the three Head Start programs being located close to one another and near the university campus. Besides the sampling method itself, our sample size was relatively smaller than previous studies. These limitations are mainly related to the strict time constraint to the researchers of one semester at Longwood University.

While the study was successful in supporting my hypothesis and previous research, there are some improvements that can be made for future research. The feedback given from the respondents have highlighted considerations of adding more activities, including different materials, and creating more educational objectives. Also, in relation to the sampling limitation, a larger sample should be adjudicated to ensure more results and decrease data errors. It is very possible that future research will support our results and help us discover more knowledge about the significance of parental involvement on children’s lives.

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Tables

Table 1

*Percentage of Child Success in Identifying Colors*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Colors Identified | Frequency | Percentage | |
| 0 | 1 | | 2.9 |
| 1 | 3 | | 8.6 |
| 2 | 5 | | 14.3 |
| 3 | 26 | | 74.3 |

Table 2

*Percentage of Family Involvement & Enjoyment*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| # Scale of Enjoyment | Frequency | Percentage |
| 5 | 4 | 11.4 |
| 6 | 2 | 5.7 |
| 7 | 5 | 14.3 |
| 8 | 4 | 11.4 |
| 9 | 3 | 8.6 |
| 10 | 17 | 48.6 |

Table 3

*Mean Comparisons for Colors Successfully Identified & Family Involvement*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| # of Colors Identified | Mean | Standard Deviation |
| 0 | 10.00 | - |
| 1 | 7.67 | 2.08 |
| 2 | 8.00 | 2.12 |
| 3 | 8.58 | 1.79 |