

Stimulating Parental Involvement in Pre-Kindergarten Aged Children

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### Abstract

Parental involvement between parents and their children is stated by many experts to be beneficial for a child's development. A 2002 study by Gonzalez-Pienda et Al. showed that children's self concept improved through parental involvement, and Jeynes (2005) even demonstrated a significant increase in test scores. These findings make clear the benefit of parental involvement, and lead to the discussion of barriers that limit access to an efficient amount of parental involvement for all children. Barriers to parental involvement include household income, (Velleymalay, 2012), as well as a lack of opportunity to cultivate relationships between parents and schools, (Smith, 2002). The purpose of this study was to test how effectively parental involvement could be stimulated amongst pre-kindergarten aged children attending the Head Start program in Prince Edward County Virginia. This is a mixed methods study that seeks to determine the effectiveness of Family Fun Time take home activities to stimulate parental involvement for the students in the program. Quantitative data will be collected through multiple choice survey questions, and the qualitative data will be collected through open ended questions in the same survey. This data will be used to indicate the effectiveness of the Family Fun Time activities at stimulating parental involvement, as well as to address the impact of the barrier of socioeconomic status. Education level of the parents is used in this study as an indicator of socioeconomic status. The qualitative data displayed, themes of fun, learning, and spending time. The quantitative data displayed a correlation between higher socioeconomic status and increased parental involvement in the surveyed participants. This study utilized a small non-generalizable sample size of 11 participants, however the results do practically support the hypothesis that the Family Fun Time activities would stimulate parental involvement, and that this is an effective way to increase parental involvement on a potentially larger scale.

## Introduction

Parental involvement has been consistently studied by experts who have determined it's positive benefits for the development of children. The results of numerous studies have shown one of the most positively affected variables in studying prenatal development is a child's academic success. A 2002 study by Gonzalez-pienda et al. found that parental involvement indirectly affects a child's self concept, which they cited as having the strongest correlation to a child's academic success. Jeynes (2005) sought to further prove the correlation between parental involvement and academic success by utilizing National Educational Longitudinal Study data to show that students with "highly involved," parents achieved an average of 4.08 higher test scores than those with reportedly "less involved" parents. These studies both ultimately indicate that parental involvement positively impacts a child's development due to improved academic performance. These findings lead one to question why there are "less involved" parents, and what means of intervention can counteract the effects of "less involved parents" preventing students from accessing the benefits of "highly involved" parents.

Parents being less involved can also be referred to as parents with barriers to high levels of parental involvement. There have been numerous studies that have investigated these barriers and have contributed to the overall understanding of why some parents are more involved than others. For example, Valleymalay (2012) used purposive sampling of 80 Indian students to conclude that household income had a greater impact on parental involvement than any other barriers studied. Smith (2002) reported finding that parent knowledge of parental involvement increased by hosting and encouraging open dialogues between parents and schools, thereby stimulating a stronger school to parent relationship. Smith's findings are an example of a method of intervention to address a barrier noted by Singh (2004), which found that 90% of parents

surveyed believed their children's schools were competent enough to deal with their children. This could be considered a barrier given that, as found by Smith (2002), before improving school to parent relationships, some parents may not even be aware that they could be considered “less involved,” with their child. When discussing the concept of more or less involved parents, it should be noted that people have different perceptions of parental involvement that often correlate to their limitations of parental involvement. Garcia and de Guzman (2020) described respondents citing, “working to earn money,” as an active form of parental involvement for their child. It is important to avoid being socioeconomically biased when describing a parent’s amount of involvement if their financial barriers limit them to only accounting for “basic obligations”, which is Joyce Epstein’s first of four main models of parental involvement (Epstein, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to test how effectively parental involvement could be stimulated amongst pre-kindergarten aged children attending the Head Start program in Prince Edward County Virginia. The results of this study are especially significant for educational programs that seek to increase the school to parent relationship as a means of increasing parental involvement. Parents of students may also find the results of this study to increase their awareness of the importance of parental involvement, and potentially encourage them to become highly involved with their child. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion of parental involvement within the discipline of childhood education.

## **Literature Review**

### **Purpose of Research**

Joyce Epstein (1987) identifies the four main models of parental involvement as being: (a) basic obligations, (b) school-to-home communications, (c) parent involvement at school, and (d) parent involvement in learning activities at home, (obtained via Xitao Fan, 2001). This research

involving parental involvement with students was conducted to display the benefits, barriers, and theory associated with this topic. An ethnographic study conducted in 2002 specifically focused on black students and their parents' involvement in their academic life. 24 parents of children in eight different South African schools were surveyed regarding their personal involvement in their children's academic life. The data showed that 90% of parents regarded their schools as being competent enough to deal with their children (Singh, 2004), while also reporting that 45% of parents also required their child to assist in work in their family business (Singh, 2004). A latent growth modeling study conducted by Crosnoe (2001) reports the finding that the two factors that generally predict higher parent involvement are: coming from an intact family, and having more educated parents. These characteristics are typically associated with families of higher socioeconomic status. These findings appear to support the ethnographic study conducted by Singh (2004), in that children having to spend significant time outside of the classroom to work for the family indicates their lower socioeconomic position.

### **Effectiveness of Parental Involvement**

The Gonzalez-pienda et al. (2002) study utilizing a structural equation model to test their hypotheses of parental involvement determined that the child's self concept was the variable most affected by parental involvement. Self concept was described as an "indirect," effect of parental involvement that according to their surveys was the most impactful factor that explains the correlation between parental involvement and academic success. A more generalizable study was conducted by Jeynes (2005), which utilized a National Educational Longitudinal Study data set as a source for his analysis. He was able to conclude that African American students with "highly involved" parents achieved test scores of an average of 4.08 points higher than their counterpart students with "less involved parents." Gonzalez-pienda et al. (2002) and Jeynes (2005) display

two different benefits of parental involvement. The former determined that an indirect effect of parental involvement (improved self concept), was the driver of academic success, while the latter concluded that highly involved parents directly correlated to increased academic performance.

### **Barriers to Parental Involvement**

Socioeconomic barriers to parental involvement are commonly cited by researchers as a way to explain the disparity in parental involvement of children analyzed in various data sets. Velleymalay (2012) used purposive sampling of 80 Indian students to determine that household income had a greater impact on parental involvement than occupation, and education level. The results of this study serve to indicate that household income is the main cause of the barriers that inhibit parental involvement. A qualitative study conducted by Smith (2002) collected observational data at committee meetings for Clark Elementary school, located in the Pacific Northwest. Parents were cited to have voiced their personal challenges regarding parental involvement. Smith noted that while income level and employment were common factors, many parents of students were non-native speakers with limited English skills. Smith also noted that through open communication and informal opportunities to build relationships between parents and schools, which is one of Epstein's models of parental involvement, (Epstein, 1987), the understanding of families increased. Smith's qualitative study appears to display an example of utilizing Epstein's model of parental involvement when faced with different socioeconomic and cultural barriers.

### **Gaps in Research**

It is important to note that outside of Western society, different models of parental involvement exist and are displayed in the qualitative study conducted by Garcia, and Rosario de Guzman in 2020 regarding parental involvement of low income Filipino parents. While in

Western society, total working hours for socioeconomically disadvantaged parents may be considered a barrier to parental involvement, Garcia and Rosario (2020) describe respondents citing working to earn money as an active form of parental involvement for their child. These findings may present a potential gap in research of parental involvement, raising the question of how parents of different socioeconomic statuses personally define their involvement. The research of Garcia and Rosario (2020) questions whether or not a socioeconomically challenged parent can really be considered “less involved,” a term used by Jeynes (2005), merely because their socioeconomic barriers limit their involvement to providing basic needs. It can be drawn from Garcia and Rosario (2020) that the western definition of family involvement could potentially be economically biased.

## **Data and Methodology**

### **Instrument**

A survey questionnaire was created by the 40 members of the Social Research and Program Evaluation team at Longwood University. The survey contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Items on the survey were designed to evaluate SMART objectives of each of five activities that were completed the previous week by Head Start families. Beyond the objectives of the activities, participants were asked about their experiences with Head Start, take home activities, and demographic information about their households.

### **Sample**

The non-probability sample for this study was based on the 51 children (ages three to five) who attend Head Start in two rural counties in Virginia. After activities were sent home with children for five days, the questionnaire was sent home with all 51 students. Attached to the questionnaire was a children’s book, to incentivize families to return the survey. Guardians of the children were

asked to complete the survey and return it to the Head Start teacher the following school day. 11 questionnaires were returned the next school day. Teachers then sent a reminder home with children to return any outstanding questionnaires. This resulted in zero more questionnaires being returned. Overall, there was a 22% response rate.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative analysis of the returned surveys is based on the close-ended questions. For this study the dependent variable is parental involvement. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was, “What was your level of involvement in the activity with the child?” The answer choices for this item were a scale from 0 to 10 with 0 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. The independent variable for this study is socioeconomic status. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was, “What is the highest degree of education you have completed?” The answer choices for this question were “Less than High School”, “High school”, “Some College”, “College degree or higher”, “Prefer not to answer”. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze these variables.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Qualitative analysis of the returned surveys is based on the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions on the survey were, “What did your family enjoy most about these activities?,” “What recommendations would you suggest to make these activities better?,” and, “What are your favorite ways to spend time with your child?.” To answer the research question, “Can after school activities stimulate parent/family involvement with children?,” inductive open coding was used to determine reoccurring themes in the participant’s responses.



### Qualitative Findings

11 Surveys were coded that included the same three open ended questions. The questions were, “What did your family enjoy most about these activities?”, “What recommendations would you suggest to make these activities better?”, and “What are your favorite ways to spend time with your child?”. Through coding the participants' responses, three themes were identified about the responses to the first and third questions mentioned above. The themes are, spending time, learning, and having fun.

The theme of spending time appeared in four of 11 surveys. For example, Respondent 2 stated they enjoyed most, “Spending time together,” in response to question one. Respondent 3 cited, “The family time we spent together,” as being the most enjoyable part of the activities. Respondent 6 stated that, “Being together and helping each other,” was most enjoyable. Lastly, Respondent 9 in correspondence with the theme stated, “The interaction with our child and the fact that the rest of the family was interested in participating...” was most enjoyable. These examples indicate that at least four out of 11 participants had a positive experience with parent-child involvement due to increased family time spent during the activities.

The theme of learning was present in three out of 11 surveys. For example, Respondent 4 stated, “My kids [were] able to learn a lot,” when answering what they found most enjoyable about the activities. This respondent also included, “Learning new activities,” as being their favorite way to spend time with their child. Respondent 2 cited, “learning new things,” as being most enjoyable. Respondent 6 stated that, “...helping each other,” was one of the two most enjoyable parts of the activities. These responses about learning and helping indicate that providing teaching opportunities for parents and kids was an effective way to stimulate fun parent-child interactions in at least three out of 11 cases.

The theme of fun was identified in three out of 11 cases. For example, Respondent 4 stated that, “[They] brought a lot of fun and laughter for our family,” in reference to the most enjoyable parts of the activities. Respondent 2 stated that, “Doing fun activities,” is their favorite way to spend time with their child. Respondent 10 stated that, “Having fun,” was the most enjoyable part of the activities, and that “Doing fun activities,” is their favorite way to spend time with their child. These responses indicate that the Family Fun Time Activities stimulated parental involvement with children in a fun way in at least two out of 11 cases. It was also evident that fun activities were a favorite form of child interaction in at least two out of 11 respondents. It can be concluded that out of these three responses analyzed, the activities being fun was a positive contributor to parental involvement with their children.

Based on the 11 responses to the survey, families enjoy parental involvement with children when they are engaged in activities that encourage spending time with the children and family, learning, and fun for all participants. Using these results to create future Family Fun Time Activities may increase reported rates of enjoyment. These results do not necessarily indicate whether or not parental involvement will be increased in the lives of the respondents outside of the Family Fun Time Activities, however they do reveal some of the components that were identified as causing a positive response to the activities.

### **Conclusion**

This study tested the ability to stimulate parental involvement through Family Fun Time take home activities for pre-kindergarten aged children enrolled in Prince Edward County Virginia’s Head Start Program. Research in the field of parental involvement has found it is effective at increasing the academic performance and self concept of a child (Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002; Jeynes, 2005). These findings lead to studies of the barriers and limitations that impact

levels of parental involvement for families. Household income and limited school to home communication are two barriers that limit parental involvement (Velleymalay, 2012; Smith, 2002), and ultimately lead to the purpose of this study.

Coding the responses from the Head Start parents showed that the mean reported level of parental involvement during the take home activities was a 7.73 out of 10. This result indicates that parental involvement was stimulated in the respondents. The bivariate analysis of the survey data also appeared to indicate a correlation between a higher degree of education completed (which was used as an indicator for socioeconomic status), resulting in a higher reported level of parental involvement during the activities. It should be noted that this data was collected from a small non-generalizable sample, that was further affected by covid 19; Head Start had not yet fully resumed a normal schedule when the parents were surveyed, and was dealing with understaffing that potentially affected the response rate.

The themes that were identified in coding the open ended portion of the surveys were fun, learning, and spending time. These findings indicate that families enjoy engaging in parental involvement when it is fun, promotes learning, and provides an opportunity to spend time with each other. Finding what respondents enjoy about parental involvement would assist in the practical application of this study. It should be noted that neither the quantitative or qualitative data in this study can indicate the effectiveness of Family Fun Time activities on long term sustained and consistent parental involvement. A longitudinal study and further research would be necessary to reach such conclusions. This study is however effective in indicating a way to stimulate an event of parental involvement, and displaying what characteristics make parental involvement enjoyable, and therefore more likely to be engaged in more frequently.

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