

How Family Enjoyment and Involvement Go Hand in Hand - Examining Head Start

Family Fun Time Activities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate Family Fun Time activities and the effects of the activities on family involvement and enjoyment. A survey questionnaire that is composed of 14 questions, 11 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions are sent home with games for the families to interact with. This is a mixed-methods study of Family Fun Time activities that are fun educational games for children/family at Head Start/early education programs to interact with. Qualitative (engagement) and quantitative (enjoyment) data were used to find that parents are more involved in Family Fun Time activities because they take pleasure in teaching new skills to their kids and watching them succeed while having a fun time. When families are interested in their child's education, it goes beyond the classroom, which means that parents need to ensure that their involvement continues after they pick up their child from Head Start.

How Family Enjoyment and Involvement go Hand in Hand

The significance of family involvement in early childhood education cannot be stressed enough. This is especially true in the context of Head Start programs, where it is crucial to establish a collaborative and engaged connection between families and instructors. Head Start provides low-income children and their families with complete early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parental involvement programs. Its goal is to ensure that all children, regardless of their family's income, have the opportunity to develop the skills necessary for lifelong achievement in school and elsewhere (Shanti, 2017). The following research question will be tested: Does participating in Family Fun Time activities affect family involvement and overall family enjoyment?

Now, Head Start does strive to create an environment that not only educates but also develops a sense of enjoyment and connection within a family by incorporating Family Fun Time activities into the educational program. Importantly, while the role of family involvement in early education is not something new, it is becoming increasingly important in today's evolving educational scene. As societal structures change and family needs increase, the necessity for collaborative efforts between educators and parents is more important than ever (Champine et al., 2017). Recognizing this, Head Start programs established methods that actively involve families in the learning process. As stated in the abstract, the purpose of this study is to evaluate Family Fun Time activities and the effects of the activities on family involvement and enjoyment.

The following review of the literature dives into research that has looked at the effects of home-learning stimulation, physical punishment, and home visits on children in Head Start. By addressing these aspects, the reader will have a more comprehensive understanding of the

challenges and successes connected with family engagement in early education, while contextualizing current research and underlining the importance of studying these themes.

Literature Review

Parental/family engagement plays an important role for children's academic success and development, but only when parents receive guidance from HeadStart individuals on how they could improve their abilities, attitudes, and knowledge, leading to beneficial advances in children's development (Ansari & Gershoff, 2015). The research looked at in this review was chosen with the goal of educating others on the importance of parental involvement in their children's development, particularly their academic success. Three important themes that were found similar throughout all of the material was physical punishment, home-learning stimulation, and home visits, which reflect how invested the parent is in the well-being of their child. By analyzing these themes, the amount of stimulation and support provided to children at home relates to participation in early preschool/Head Start programs as well as how it can be utilized to predict children's development (Bradley et al., 2011).

Physical Punishment

Although parents have the legal right to spank their children, most preschools and early education programs have stated that they do not participate in spanking such as Head Start because spanking puts children at risk for behavioral and emotional problems as well as physical harm (Gershoff et al., 2016). Encouraging positive parenting behaviors has been suggested to reduce the usage of physical discipline, such as spanking, when children begin to misbehave. The removal of physical force from preschools demonstrates to parents that there are successful and effective methods of child guidance, as well as the ability to practice positive punishment in a way that is not detrimental to the child (Gershoff et al., 2016). According to a small-scale

qualitative study done by Ansari & Gershoff, moms who participated in Head Start were less likely to spank their children and more likely to apply non punitive forms of punishment, such as time-outs on their children (2015). To benefit from observational learning, parents must observe other parents/teachers demonstrating positive reinforcement such as participating in socializing activities and learning about child development (Mayer & Blome, 2013). This will not only benefit the parents but also their children, resulting in a much healthier relationship between the two.

Home Visits

According to the research by Shanti (2017), engaging parents in home-based programs at Head Start is important for the safety of the child and their development as they grow. The responsibility of a home visitor is to visit the home and engage the families by building productive relationships with the parents, which is done through the family's way of being and culture. Home visitors want to be able to find common ground through certain customs and values that the children have been exposed to that other children are unable to experience or understand. In the article, *The effect of head start on parenting outcomes for children living in non-parental care*, children in nonparental care, that had caregivers who are not their biological parents, were found to be more susceptible to negative consequences such as physical and mental health concerns, behavioral issues, and low school performance as a result of Head Start programs on parenting results (Pratt et al., 2014). The study also discovered a high likelihood of home visits, and high preschool-based parent involvement, but not home-based involvement that involves reading and activities, which explains the low poor school performance and even mental health (Pratt et al., 2014). Home visits strengthen relationships with parents by establishing trust and carefully expressing to parents what they may need to do to assist their child in succeeding.

However, home visitors have reported that they require further assistance and training in connection building and that the parents' problems are the most challenging obstacle to their success in their program because it addresses mental health, which they are not specialized in (Shanti, 2017).

Home-learning Stimulation

Another area that preschool/early education programs like Head Start investigated further was home-learning stimulation because children who received high levels of structured stimulation at home performed better in terms of language/cognitive development and absorbed more (2011). In addition to several study findings, children who come from parents with higher levels of knowledge and skills perform better as a result of engagement, and children's involvement in early education programs like Head Start will depend on the quality of social and emotional growth and learning support they receive at home (2011). The lack of effective parental participation is linked to a decline in social/emotional preparedness for school, therefore research in the future should focus on the children who are most vulnerable to social maladjustment (McWayne et al., 2013). Caring for children with “severe emotional and behavioral challenges” may harm parenting methods due to the stress that caregivers experience from not being able to access high-quality medical and assistance programs (Champine et al., 2017). Head Start and many other low-income preschool/early education programs provide opportunities for parents/caregivers to gain understanding on child development and strategies for parenting. Caregivers notably reported learning how to successfully handle their children's challenging emotions and behaviors, develop and attain healthy objectives, and use coping strategies when angry or irritated because of the information they were provided with (Champine et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the literature presented and analyzed above demonstrates that physical punishment, home-learning stimulation, and home visits are just a few outcomes that explain the academic achievement of children in preschools/early education programs. It is critical for parents and caregivers to understand how to positively care for their children and assist them in succeeding in school. The findings revealed that if parents/caregivers were more active in their children's life, both in terms of knowing about their development and helping them learn at home, as well as in school, the child would be more likely to succeed.

Data and Methodology

Instrument

A survey questionnaire was created by eight members of the Social Research and Program Evaluation Team at Longwood University. The survey consisted of 14 questions, 11 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions. The first question on the survey asked respondents for informed consent. Any respondent who answered "no" to the informed consent were not able to see any other questions. The survey included questions that measured family involvement, family enjoyment, evaluation of SMART objectives, and demographics. The survey was sent online through the Qualtrics program. Head Start teachers emailed links to the survey to guardians and children brought home books with a QR code attached.

Sample

The non-probability sample for this study was based on 17 children (ages three to five) who attend Head Start in rural Virginia. Head Start is a federally subsidized preschool for families with economic need. Family Fun Time activities were sent home with children. With the Family Fun Time activity, a children's book with an attached QR code was sent encouraging families to take the online survey after they completed the activity. One of the activities the kids

were sent home with was "Counting Caterpillars". They had to accurately determine the colors of the pom poms and attach the pom poms to the cut out circles in order to create the caterpillar.

Teachers sent a reminder email to caregivers at home to complete any outstanding surveys. This resulted in four questionnaires being completed. Overall, there was a 4% response rate.

Therefore, data from previous years (2019 and 2022) on Family Fun Time activities were added to the analysis. This resulted in 66 completed surveys to be used in analysis (four from 2023, 20 from 2022, and 42 from 2019).

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis of completed surveys is based on the close-ended questions. For this study, the dependent variable is family involvement. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was, "On a scale from 0 to 10, how much did this activity encourage your family to work together?" (0=not at all, 10=a great amount). The independent variable is the enjoyment of after school activities. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was, "On a scale from 0 to 10, how much did your family enjoy this activity?" (0=not at all, 10=a great amount). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze these variables.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis of the completed surveys (from 2019, 2022, and 2023) was based on open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were, "What did you enjoy about this activity?", "What are your suggestions for improving this activity?", and "Typically, what activities do you do with your child?". To answer the research question, "is engaging in family-fun activities impacting family involvement?" Inductive open coding was used to determine reoccurring themes in the respondents' responses.

Findings

Qualitative Section

The two key themes identified by the Family Fun Time activities surveys that were sent home are parents' and kids' enjoyment from the activities and the parents' level of engagement with them through the activities. It has been shown that the level of involvement parents or caregivers have with their child during an activity influences the overall enjoyment of family experiences.

Enjoyment

Ten out of sixteen respondents mentioned in their open-ended answers that they and their child enjoyed the Family Fun Time activities. Respondent 22-16 wrote down, "My 2 sons and myself enjoyed the different learning outcomes that came along with the activities and how easy the directions were". Children and their parents/caregivers find the activities enjoyable because of the straightforward instructions and the wide array of outcomes that may be achieved from the various activities. "Our family really enjoyed how simple the activities were and how much our child enjoyed them, even completing some with siblings," wrote respondent 22-03. This suggests that the level of enjoyment may be influenced by how simple the directions are to follow. In addition, the activity was extended to the entire family as opposed to just the one child who was given the activity to do at home. This provides a greater sense of family involvement, which may ultimately lead to a greater sense of happiness within the family. Respondent 22-12 stated, "My family and son enjoyed doing the little things we did together." This suggests that the kids and the caregivers enjoyed the activities because they were being done as a family and on their own terms instead of feeling obligated to participate. Overall, the majority of parents who answered the open-ended survey questions expressed that they enjoyed seeing their kids succeed and

having fun while learning new things. Additionally, they appreciated how easy it was for them and their child to follow the instructions that were provided. With clear instructions, parents can communicate the activity to more family members, which extends to everyone and increases parent-child engagement.

Engagement

In their open-ended responses, eleven out of sixteen respondents mentioned that they preferred doing it as a family as opposed to just having the child do it with help from a parent or guardian. Respondent 22-15 put down, “Spending time together, doing something educational is always fun family time.” Apart from learning new things with their child, parents take pleasure in spending quality time with them while also teaching them new things. Respondent 22-05 said, “It's fun when you want to do something fun and enjoyable for your kids and family.” This supports the theme that more family involvement in these activities makes it more enjoyable because they get to see their kids perform well and have fun while doing so. This further demonstrates that the parents are benefiting from family involvement along with their children. Respondent 22-10 stated, “Doing them together, Daughter says she loves doing things with mom and dad.” This represents the importance of family involvement for the well-being of children and parents/caregivers. Additionally, it supports the idea that children's development and growth are dependent upon the emphasis that is given to devoting quality time and being involved with them overall.

The involvement of parents in their child's life is beneficial for both the parent and the child. The survey findings support the two themes—family engagement and enjoyment—and they share a few similarities. Overall, the information gathered from the open-ended responses reveals that parents and caregivers get their enjoyment of the activity from three factors: how

easy the instructions can be followed; witnessing their child pick up new skills; and witnessing their child succeed while having an enjoyable experience. The involvement survey results indicate that parents are more involved in Family Fun Time activities because they take pleasure in teaching new skills to their kids and watching them succeed while having a fun time—a theme that was found to be prevalent in both enjoyment and engagement. In addition, when asked what they enjoyed most about the Counting Caterpillars activity, Respondent 23-01 gave the response, "allowing my child to confidently guide me." The simplicity of the instructions allowed the parents to be happy to be involved because their child could read them with ease and display their abilities without the help of their parents. The response confirms the idea that parents enjoy taking part in Family Fun Time activities when their kids are doing well and having a great time. It also points out the benefit of having clear directions, which is a previous theme that was covered with emphasis on engagement and enjoyment. After examining the responses, It is evident that parents who take pleasure in spending quality time with their kids are most likely to spend quality time with them when the activities aren't taking place.

Quantitative Section

The dependent variable being measured is how involved the parents/caregivers are with their child during the activity. Respondents are asked to rank on a scale of 0-10, with zero meaning they did not participate at all and ten being they were very engaged with their child during the activity. The independent variable is how much enjoyment the family had throughout the activity, which is also on a scale of 0-10, with zero meaning they didn't enjoy the activity at all and ten meaning they really enjoyed it. The hypothesis is that family involvement contributes to overall enjoyment of an activity.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Family Involvement

Engagement by Family	
Mean	7.2
Standard Deviation	2.6

Note: N= (66 surveys)

The dependent variable had an average mean score of 7.2 and a standard deviation of 2.6, as shown in Table 1. This implies that 72% of respondents engaged with their child during the activity, however the scale responses were spread out between respondents. When asked, "How involved was your family throughout the activity?" parents' engagement with their children was slightly above average.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation of Enjoyment by Family Engagement

Enjoyment	
Mean	8.2
Standard Deviation	2.1

Note: N= (66 surveys)

Table 2 indicates that the independent variable had an average mean score of 8.2 and a standard deviation of 2.1. This means that regardless of whether they participated or not, 82% of respondents enjoyed the activity. The scale responses to "How much did your family enjoy this activity?" were comparably spread out to engagement, although a bit less, indicating that respondents made similar scale judgments for enjoyment rather than involvement.

Table 3

Mean and Standard Deviation of Family Engagement and Enjoyment

	Enjoyment	Engagement	Standard Deviation
Mean	1	2.0	N/A
	3	4.0	N/A
	4	0.0	N/A
	5	6.6	4.4
	6	5.0	1.4
	7	6.6	1.6
	8	7.1	2.0
	9	8.2	1.8
	10	8.0	2.0

Note: N= (66 surveys)

Table 3 compares engagement and enjoyment using the mean and standard deviation. The numbers on the scale (0-10) are displayed beneath enjoyment. The mean and standard deviation found throughout the research are shown beneath engagement. According to the data, the median scale response for enjoyment is 6.5, while the median scale response for engagement is 6.6. This suggests that more than half of the respondents both enjoyed and participated in the activities.

There are three spots in the table that represent N/A under the category engagement.

Respondents who scored 1, 3, or 4 on the enjoyment scale were more likely to skip the engagement scale question. The data also shows that, according to the standard deviation, the scale responses are widely spaced out, with a median of 1.9. Therefore, not everyone who participated circled the same number, but rather had a variety of responses on the scale.

The initial hypothesis indicated that family involvement increases overall enjoyment, however the data reveals the opposite. The overall enjoyment of the activity influences whether or not families participate in it. The majority of respondents who scored high on the enjoyment scale also scored high on the engagement scale, while those who scored low on the engagement scale still scored in the middle on the enjoyment scale. That is, respondents who scored in the middle for enjoying the activities did not have to be fully involved in order to enjoy the activity.

While engagement and enjoyment do overlap, respondents do not have to be fully engaged to enjoy the activities they are given.

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the impacts of Family Fun Time activities on family involvement and enjoyment. These activities serve as a pathway, fostering open communication, trust, and a willingness to collaborate to a child's early learning experience. The initial hypothesis indicated that family involvement increases overall enjoyment, however the findings revealed the opposite. The more a child or family appreciates an activity, the more likely they will participate. According to the results, more than half of the survey respondents both appreciated and participated in the activities. This suggests that 82% of respondents loved the activity whether they participated or not. Representing that the more fun something is for the child and parent, the more likely they will do it together. Similar to previous research, It is evident that parents who take pleasure in spending quality time with their kids are most likely to spend quality time with them when the activities aren't taking place.

Overall, the implications go beyond the individual child and family, emphasizing the societal importance of investing in extensive, community-based early childhood education initiatives. Recognizing the critical significance of family engagement, society should prioritize policies and procedures that facilitate and encourage full engagement when it comes to education and developing skills. Finally, the research on Family Fun Time activities in Head Start programs reinforces the interconnected nature of families, education, and society, urging us to prioritize and invest in a child's formative years.

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