Parental Involvement

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**Abstract**

This mixed methods study investigated the level of parental involvement children who attend Head Start in Farmville, Virginia have. This issue needed to be addressed because these students (Head Start) come from a lower socio-economic status and because of this, they might not have as much parental involvement as desired and could start to get behind compared to students that have a high parental involvement rate/ parents that actively encourage them to learn. The purpose of this study is to see whether the take-home activities sent home increased parental involvement rates or not. Students (N = 51) were given 5 take-home activities as well as a survey attached to it (the survey was collected and analyzed). One of the main points for this study was parental involvement and 5 respondents (out of 11) reported having communication with the head start teacher either daily or more (high involvement in the child’s life). A common theme in the data is that the higher the communication with the teacher, the higher the parental involvement. Qualitatively, the themes within this study were that family time is important/ something of value and playing and doing activities that don’t include electronics is their favorite way to spend time together. Given the 22% response rate, more research is needed to better understand the impact parental involvement has on children that attend Head Start.

*Keywords:* parental involvement, head start, communication, survey

**Introduction**

The concept of parental involvement and the idea that it has a positive influence on a student’s academic achievement has become alluring in our society to the point where many are seeing this as an important “ingredient” for the possible remedy for many problems in education (Fan & Chen, 2001). The research problem was that families who have children in head start tend to have a low parental involvement rate. As a result of this, these children may experience less parental involvement and may have trouble learning certain skills needed to be able to progress into higher education grade levels (these children would fall behind their classmates that have high level of parental involvement). The term “parental involvement” is used heavily when discussing education and includes several different forms of “participation” used by parents. A study by Kathleen Cotton and Karen Reed Wikelund (2001) found that the more intensively parents are involved in their children’s learning, the more beneficial the achievement effect are, and this is held true for all types of parent involvement in children’s learning and for all type and ages of students (Cotton & Wikelund, 2001). More deeply, there are strong indicators that the most effective forms of parental involvement are those in which that engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities in their home; examples include programs that involve parents reading with their children, supporting them on homework assignments or perhaps tutoring them. While this study led to great findings, it failed to include a larger percentage of minorities as well as students from a lower socio-economic status.

Parental involvement, and engagement in education, matters now more than ever because of the decline. This can be due to a variety of reasons, but many have drawn attention to a rise in electronic devices (many schools provide iPads for students) as well as parents are working longer hours (Galindoa & Sheldon, 2011). Research from 2016 showed a drop in parents who believe that having an intimate parent-teacher relationship (having strong communication) is effective (2021). Additionally, many parents now favor remote methods of communication (online portals, video portals) and are less likely to attend parent-teacher conferences or certain school activities (2021). This shift, which idolizes electronic devices, is concerning because it means having less communication with teachers which ultimately leads to having a low parental involvement rate. While digital media can help families stay informed of events, students are missing out on crucial developmental time when parents can’t offer time and support (this is especially true for lower income students in Head Start) (2021).

The purpose of this research is to find how crucial parental involvement is for students especially during developmental years (do family fun time activities encourage parental involvement?). For some, it’s easy to say that sending their child to school is all that’s needed for their education; however, schools can only do so much and help a child if they don’t have support at home but without parental involvement, how can they truly learn? Additionally, when parents fail to have an active role in their child’s life, children may not only fall behind compared to their peers but may “pick up” the cue that their parents don’t value the education the child is receiving.

**Literature Review**

Numerous factors influence a students’ ability for wanting to do well in school/ life; however, a family bond and the impact it has are particularly strong. A study from the 2012 National Household Education Surveys Programs found parent involvement in student’s learning is widely related academic performance and class engagement and without it, not only do a child’s grades drop, but the child may be more susceptible to becoming deviant (Higgins & Katsipataki, 2015). Often times, parents immediately criticize schools and peers for the wrongdoings of their children but fail to realize the “absence” of a parent can also contribute to this behavior (no parental involvement = more “free” time to do whatever) (Porumbu & Necuoib, 2013). To have a strong and fruitful academic career for children that steers away from trouble, parents must create a bond with them as well a relationship with teachers (Higgins and Katsipataki, 2015).

While there are many ways to describe the term “parental involvement”, researchers agree that it can be defined as having parents regularly participate in the child’s life and aid with the success for that child (Larocque, 2011). Michael Chen (*Parental Involvement*) finds parental involvement to be the influence the home and the school and most importantly, finds this influence to equate to better school attendance, higher grades, and less discipline problems (both at home and school) compared to other students with less parental involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001). Ways parents can do this is by encouraging academic achievement (as well as aiding with this if the child is falling behind), develop a well school-to home communication, reserving time for each other (“family time”), and attending school events such as parent-teacher conference or even sports games/ performances (Fan & Chen, 2001). Alongside this are four terms researchers say are crucial for every parent to carry out. First is parental encouragement and this means parents often seek to engage students with learning-related activities (Feng et al., 2010). Second is parental modeling and this is related to how students derive their will to want to well in school from their parents and how well their parents advocate for it/ model pro-learning behavior. Parental reinforcement is next, and this focuses on parents and their ability to “reinforce” behaviors that develop associated with “positive learning outcomes”. Lastly is parental instruction and this is focuses on social interactions between parents and children during involvement activities (whether learning based or not) as they engage to share their thinking on learning strategies, processes, outcomes, and potentially engage in educational strategies (Feng et al., 2010).

**Epstein’s Theory**

Epstein’s theory states students succeed at higher levels when both the internal and external influence (parental involvement and outside) work together to promote well-rounded student learning and development (Epstein, 1992). Galindoa and Sheldon (2011) see Epstein’s model and argue that different home and school settings constitute an “overlapping spheres of influence” on both the children’s development and academic achievement by maintaining a stable relationship, the positive influence/ connection with one another would determine the child’s academic success (Galindoa & Sheldon, 2011). This form of thinking exhibits the influence of interpersonal relationships with the idea that changes in this structure have an effect on the child (Seay, 2020). Epstein also has created a “structure” or “framework” of the six types of involvement; these include parenting (family support, comfortable and safe home environment, and family commitment/ time), communication (creating an effective form of communication for school-to-home and home-to-school to track the child’s academic process), volunteering (organizing parental help with the school or joining a school/classroom volunteer program), learning at home (provide a way to help the child at home with homework and other school-related activities), decision-making (become a member of PTA/PTO or other parent organizations to formulate ways to strive for academic success), and collaborating with the community (finding new ways to interact with the community/ creating community activities) (Khajehpoura & Ghazvini, 2011). These further show the importance of parental involvement and the effect it has.

Overall, parental involvement can have many negative effects on not only the child, but the family itself (low grades could cause arguments). By looking at these findings, we can see how having good communication with the child’s teacher can promote well-roundedness in the child as well as promote development (a want to learn). While the literature presents excellent data and research, it fails to account for children who come from a lower socio-economic status (children who attend head start in a rural area). By missing this point, it doesn’t account for the fact that often children who come from a lower socio-economic status have parents that either work longer hours or may have more than one job. This means that their parental involvement levels are lower, and this can also lead to the children falling behind compared to their peers who have high levels of parental involvement (parent communicating with teacher, parent helping student with homework, or even reading a book before sleep).

**Data and Methods**

**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 close-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. 1 questionnaire was returned the next school day. Teachers then sent a reminder home with children to return any outstanding questionnaires. This resulted in 10 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, “How often do you communicate with your child’s teachers at Head Start?”. The answer choices for this item were “daily or more”, “weekly”, “monthly”, “less than monthly”, and “never”. The independent variable for this study is sending the astronaut pudding family activity home. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was, “Did the Astronaut Pudding Activity encourage your family to spend time together?”. The answer choices for this question were on a scale from 0-10 with 0 = not at all and 10 = a great amount. 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, if we (my group for the project) send a family activity home (astronaut pudding), we expect parents to be more involved in the child’s life (increase parental involvement), inductive open coding was used to determine reoccurring themes in the participant’s responses.

**Findings**

***Quantitative Findings***

For the quantitative findings section, the following variables were analyzed using descriptive statistics: Parent communication with teacher and parent involvement with their child. For parent communication, 5 respondents reported having communication with the head start teacher either daily or more. On a weekly basis, 5 respondents reported as this being their maximum amount of communication. 1 respondent reported to communicating with the head start teacher monthly. See Figure 1. below.

Figure 1.

*Parent communication*

The dependent variable is parent involvement measured on a scale from 0 to 10. The mean parent involvement score was 9.2. The median score was 10. The mode score was 10 and the Standard deviation was 1.23. See Table 1. below.

Table 1.

*Parent involvement*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean | Median | Mode | S.D. |
| Level of Involvement | 9.2 | 10 | 10 | 1.23 |

A bivariate analysis was run and the mean parent involvement for daily or more communication with the teacher was 9.2. The mean for parent involvement for weekly communication with the child’s teacher was 9, while the mean for monthly communication with the child’s teacher was 10. See Table 2. below.

Table 2.

*Mean Parent Involvement by Parent’s Communication with Teacher*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Time Spent | Mean |
| Daily or more | 9.2 |
| Weekly | 9 |
| Monthly | 10 |

By looking at all the data, we can see how the levels of parental involvement increased when the parent had communication with the head start teacher. This was shown when the overall mean for the level of involvement was 9.2 (all parents reported to communicating with the head start teacher). This data ties in with the literature above because if parents were to not have any form of communication with their child’s teacher, their parental involvement levels would be low (these parents strived to not be “absent” from the educational life and would at least communicate with their child’s teacher once a month).

***Qualitative Findings***

Family is an important factor for child development and success. While there is not “one true” definition for “parental involvement”, researchers agree that it can be defined as having a child’s parents regularly participate in the child’s life and aid with the success for that child. To find the amount of parent involvement done, a survey was given to parents of children who attend head start in Farmville, Virginia. Eleven open-ended survey questions were coded, and three themes were found. The themes were that family time is important/ something of value and playing and doing non-electronic device activities as one of their favorite ways to spend together.

Of the 10 open-ended survey question answers out of 11 surveys received, 5 included the code that family time is important. When asked what the family enjoyed the most about the activities, respondent #2 stated,” spending time together, and learning new things” (Unpublished Raw Data on Parental Involvement). When asked the same question, respondent #3 stated, “The family time we spent together. Loved him being so happy doing the activities.” Respondent #4 said,” it brought a lot of fun and laughter for our family” (Unpublished Raw Data on Parental Involvement). To the question,” what did your family enjoy most about these activities”, respondent #6 said,” being together and helping each other.” To the question above, respondent #9 responded,” the interaction with our child and the fact that the rest of the family was interested in participating as well.” (Unpublished Raw Data on Parental Involvement). By looking at most answers, we can see how these activities reminded families of the joy of spending time together even if it’s to do an educational arts and crafts project. Additionally, it can also be inferred that family time is crucial because the parent/parents may not have enough time to dedicate to their families.

Another code found in the data was playing and doing non-electronic device activities was one of their (parents of children) favorite ways to spend time together. Out of 10 open-ended survey question answers (11 surveys received in total), all of them included this theme (all except for #7 because it was blank). When asked,” what are your favorite ways to spend time with your child,” respondent #1 answered,” #1 singing and dancing together! Cooking [,] arts and crafts [,] reading [,] [and] going for walks.” (Unpublished Raw Data on Parental Involvement). When asked the same question, respondent #2 stated,” doing fun activities,” while respondent #3 stated,” reading, going “4 wheeling”, playing.” To the same question, respondent #4 said,” learning new activities” and respondent #5 responded,” doing things and getting out of the house” (Unpublished Raw Data on Parental Involvement). Respondent #6 was questioned the same and he or she answered,” reading and playing house and reading” and different to this, respondent #8 answered, “making up our own stories… cooking.” Similar to the answers above, respondent #9 answered the question above by stating,” reading, playing, exploring, and museums” while respondent #10 said,” doing fun activities.” By looking at these answers, we can see how doing activities that do not include any form of electronics is common (may want to teach the child that one can have fun without electronics”. By looking at the statements for respondents #1 and #5, one can infer that the parent likes to engage with the child as a way to get out of the house and physically engage with child without having electronic devices to distract this crucial time.

By looking back at the qualitative findings, we can see that common themes within the survey that correlate with parental involvement and the activities are that family time is important/ something of value and playing and doing non-electronic device activities as one of their favorite ways to spend together. Additionally, the data suggests that because of hectic schedules, these activities provided an outlet for parents to unwind and engage in fun activities with their child. Although not every activity was completed, simply starting the activities gave families a way to engage with the child and aid in teaching different academic concepts to the child.

**Conclusion**

Parental involvement truly creates success in children and without it, our future is doomed (less parental involvement = more opportunities to follow the wrong path). While there are many ways to describe the term “parental involvement”, researchers agree that it can be defined as having parents regularly participate in the child’s life and aid with the success for that child (Larocque, 2011). The critical role that parental involvement plays in not only the child’s education, but the child’s life has been examined in countless reports and studies; the research proves the same point every time and supports the conclusions that parental involvement increases academic achievement, parental involvement leads to better school behavior, and parental involvement benefits children as well as the parents. The purpose of this study was to see whether the take-home activities sent home increased parental involvement rates or not and looking at the data above, we can see the levels did increase greatly especially with a parent saying, “I would pay for activities like this… these activities made it so easy and stress free to do something together” (Unpublished Raw Data on Parental Involvement). Looking at the quantitative data, the SMART goals were achieved as well as high levels of parental involvement were shown. The qualitative data exhibits that the activities sent home encouraged family time, were fun, and helped children learn new things. As a whole, in order to provide a positive and fruitful academic experience, as well as having kids that steer from trouble, parental involvement needs to be something to strive for and it should begin with communication. A good start would be communicating with teachers, which could be setting up a communication system, or supporting the child on his or her homework and this not only ensures parents are up to date on what is going on school, but the parent is also spending crucial time with the child.

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