

Assessing Family Involvement in Head Start Families with Family Fun Time Activities

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### **Abstract**

Family involvement within the home and school can play a positive role in influencing an individual and is linked to increasing a child's likelihood of success (Espstein, 2010). The purpose of this study was to examine whether Family Fun Time Activities affect family involvement. A mixed methods study was conducted with Head Start families in rural Virginia. Along with the Family Fun Time Activity, a survey was sent home with children (ages three to five) with open-ended and closed-ended questions. The themes in the survey responses were learned skills, enjoyment, and quality time. Most of the respondents indicated that the activities encouraged family involvement and diversity in educational attainment with the majority of respondents having some college education. The practical implications of this study are that providing pre-planned activities for children to complete can increase family involvement.

## Introduction

Society depends on future generations as they will soon make decisions regarding our society's well-being. However, children are very impressionable, and adults tend to play an active role in impacting their growth. Therefore, parent involvement in childhood plays a crucial role in building the foundation for future achievements among children (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; McWayne & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013). For example, family engagement increases the likelihood of success in child development by encouraging positive behaviors and improving educational achievement (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; McWayne & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013). Hence, it is imperative that children receive adequate family involvement.

Previous studies have shown the level of parent involvement varies based on gender and the opportunities educational institutions provide families (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; Choi et al., 2014; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011; McBride et al., 2005; McWayne & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013; Mendez, 2010; Shears & Robinson, 2005). More specifically, the studies focus on the differences between the paternal and maternal roles in family involvement and the link between Head Start programs and parental involvement. Unfortunately, the various studies viewed did not discuss the relationship between the parent's level of educational attainment and parent involvement. Therefore, in this study, it is essential to evaluate the possible connection between these two variables in order to assess whether educational attainment affects parent involvement. Additionally, the previous literature showed limitations in their data collection methods as they relied upon mothers' perceptions, or the reports of parents and teachers, which resulted in low response rates. Thus, conducting this study that examines data trends over three years can adequately present information on the importance of parent involvement through consistent and sufficient data.

The significance of this study is that it evaluates the importance of family involvement within low-income families who have children in the Head Start program. This study provides families with information on the importance of parent involvement as well as various strategies on how to improve involvement with their children. Additionally, the Head Start program has the ability to use the data in this study to improve its approach to encouraging family involvement. It also looks at the diverse education levels these families attained and how that may impact the feasibility of family involvement. The purpose of this study was to examine whether Family Fun Time Activities affect family involvement within Head Start families.

### **Literature Review**

According to Epstein (2010), the internal model of influence shows that the home, school, and community can play a role in influencing an individual. This connection helps children learn the importance of going to school and working hard and allows parents to become more involved. Parental involvement is the parenting style in which the relationship between the parents and the child consists of the following: safe and supportive home conditions, communication, parent-teacher interactions, participation in education-based events and decision-making processes, and other learning activities. These various indicators of family involvement fall under six specific dimensions, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2010). Several sources discuss the relationship between parental involvement and child development. More specifically, these sources cover the differences between maternal and paternal parental involvement and the influence of Head Start programs on parental involvement.

### **Gender and Parental Involvement**

Various literature examines the different paternal and maternal attitudes and roles toward parental involvement and child outcomes. Historically, research on parental influence has solely focused on the quality of maternal care. In today's society, fathers are transitioning into a more paternal role by increasing the quantity and quality of time spent with their children (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011; McBride et al., 2005; Shears & Robinson, 2005). However, in a study on maternal and paternal attitudes, the authors found that most mothers still have authority in determining the father's role in their children's lives (McBride et al., 2005). Regardless of the ongoing control most mothers have in their child's life, there are still benefits to paternal parental involvement. In a study by Choi, Palmer, and Pyun (2014), their findings suggest that children behaviorally and cognitively benefit from father involvement through time spent and the amount of contact fathers have with their children. Additionally, fathers who pay child support benefit their children because it helps relieve financial and maternal stress, which allows mothers to focus on the child (Choi et al., 2014). Although these study results support the benefits of paternal care, it is essential to note that the data collection method of this study is flawed as it mainly contains responses from the mothers' perceptions. Several studies that examine the benefits of paternal parental involvement on child development receive unsupportive results to their hypotheses due to various limitations. The authors of the different sets of literature face issues with data collection because they depend on parent reports, and they did not incorporate enough variables and factors in their study to further explore paternal roles and their impact on child development (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011; McBride et al., 2005; Shears & Robinson, 2005). Overall, the scope of parental involvement has changed recently from the sole focus of maternal roles to paternal roles in child care. Studies have found positive relationships between paternal involvement and child cognitive and behavioral development, but further empirical

evidence is necessary to grasp a better understanding of the relationship between these two factors.

### **Head Start Programs and Parental Involvement**

In addition to evaluating the difference between the father's and mother's roles in parental involvement, several sources also examine the relationship between parental involvement and children in Head Start programs. According to Ansari & Gershoff (2016), Head Start is a program funded by the federal government in the United States that serves to aid low-income families by providing children with an early education. Head Start also encourages parent involvement as it tries to influence parents to interact and learn different skills within the program. Through conducting studies, some literature suggests that parental involvement in Head Start programs has been influential in parenting, which has, in turn, been noteworthy towards child development and academic readiness. After assessing Family and Child Experiences surveys to determine the extent to which Head Start programs influence parent and child outcomes, Ansari & Gershoff (2016) indicate that parent involvement helps to enhance parenting strategies. Similarly, a study on Head Start interventions on parental involvement examines the reading frequency of parents toward their children, demonstrating a significant difference between the intervention group and the control group, with the intervention group reading more (Mendez, 2010). These two sources conduct studies that examine the link between parenting outcomes and Head Start programs. Further, the literature states that with the encouragement of Head Start, parents actively volunteer to participate in their child's education and provide safe learning environments (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; McWayne & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013). With parents learning new skills and focusing on enhancing their child's education, children also obtain self-control and social skills (McWayne &

Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013). To help explain this idea, Ansari & Gershoff (2016) mention the *parent investment model*, which presents the idea that parental investment can improve their children's chances of academic and developmental success in the future. Literature finds that Head Start programs, parental involvement, and better parenting strategies have a positive relationship with child behavior, academic achievement, and social and emotional readiness (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; McWayne & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013; Mendez, 2010). It is important to note that these studies contain certain limitations. Some of these studies express issues with relying on data collection from parent or teacher reports, low response rates, and the studies being correlational without being able to eliminate all biases (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; McWayne & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013; Mendez, 2010). Due to these restraints, the authors of these various sources are not able to officially state the causal relationships between all the variables within their studies. Ultimately, along with parental involvement, these studies find that Head Start encourages new parenting skills, influencing child development.

The themes that are in discussion are the differences between paternal and maternal roles in parental involvement and the link between Head Start programs and parental involvement. According to the Epstein model (2010), parental involvement includes six categories: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Under these six dimensions lie several indicators, such as communication, parental participation in the child's education, and a safe home environment. Studies within the literature examine the positive influence of parental involvement from mothers and fathers on child development (Choi et al., 2014; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011; McBride et al., 2005; Shears & Robinson, 2005). These sources also discover the relationship between Head Start programs and improving parenting skills and encouraging academic success and social and emotional readiness

for children (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; McWayne & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013; Mendez, 2010). Therefore, these studies show a pattern of the positive impact parent involvement has on many aspects of a child's life, regardless of gender. Ultimately, this information can potentially help the future gatherings of data on gender differences in parent involvement in single-parent families and the relationship between parental skills and child development when participating in the Head Start programs.

## **Data and Methodology**

### **Instrument**

A survey was created by eight members of the Social Research and Program Evaluation Team at Longwood University. The survey consisted of 14 questions, 11 close-ended questions, and three open-ended questions. The first question on the survey asked respondents for informed consent. Any respondents 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 Qualtrics. Head Start teachers e-mailed 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 needs. The Clothespin Counting Wheel activity was sent home with the children. This activity required the children to identify 10 colors and 10 numbers by placing the clothespin on the correct sections of the wheel. Each section contained a different number of circles that equaled up to 10, and each section had different colored circles. With the Clothespin



Counting Wheel activity, a children's book with an attached QR code was sent encouraging families to take the online survey after they completed the activity. Teachers sent a reminder e-mail to parents 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 for this study is the parent's educational attainment. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was, "What is the highest level of education you've completed?" Answer choices for this item are, "some high school," "high school diploma or GED," "certification from a trade/vocational school," "some college," "Associate's degree," "Bachelor's degree," and "Graduate degree or more". 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 from survey responses. 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, "Do

family fun time activities affect family involvement?”, inductive open coding was used to determine reoccurring themes in the respondents’ responses.

## Findings

### Quantitative Findings

In this study, the dependent variable is family involvement. This is asked on a 0 (not at all) to 10 (a great amount) scale. The independent variable is the parent’s level of educational attainment. Respondents answered “some high school,” “high school diploma or GED,” “certification from a trade/vocational school,” “some college,” “Associate’s degree,” “Bachelor’s degree,” or “Graduate degree or more”. The hypothesis is Family Fun Time Activities affect family involvement.

The mean score for family involvement was 7.2. The standard deviation was 2.6. This shows that most of the respondents indicated that the Family Fun Time Activities encouraged family involvement.

Table 1.

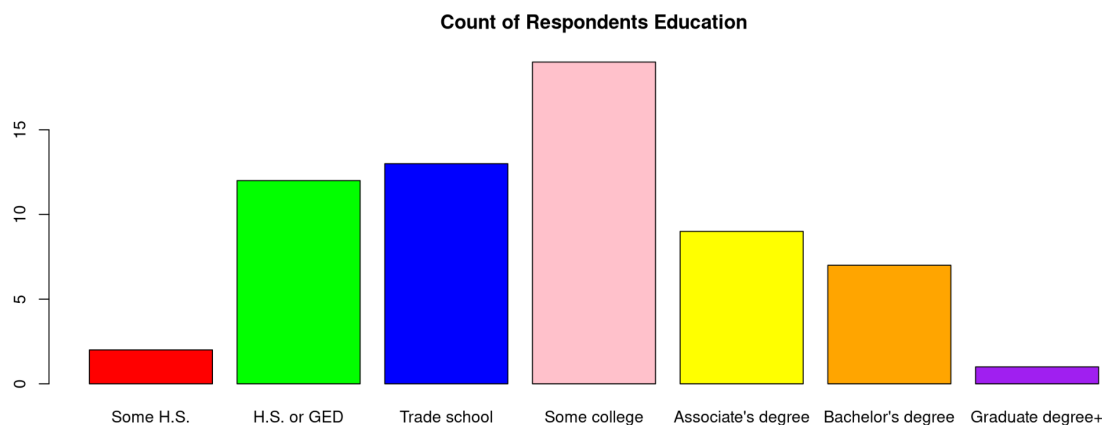
*Means and standard deviation of family involvement*

Involvement	Mean	SD
	7.2	2.6

*Note.* N=66

Table 1 shows the level of involvement within Head Start families upon completing the Family Fun Time Activities. A mean of 7.2 on a 0 (not at all) to 10 (a great amount) scale, means that, in this study, the majority of respondents experienced increased family involvement while participating in the activities they received.

Figure 1.



*Note.* A bar graph that shows the count of survey respondents' level of educational attainment.

Figure 1 shows that, in this study, the majority of respondents selected “some college” as their level of educational attainment. The level of educational attainment answer choices “some high school,” and “graduate degree or more” had the lowest response rates with “some high school” being selected by two respondents and “graduate degree or more” being selected by one respondent. The answer choices “high school diploma or GED” and “certification from a trade/vocational school” had the second highest response rates. Twelve respondents selected “high school diploma or GED,” and thirteen respondents selected “certification from a trade/vocational school.” Lastly, “Associate’s degree” was selected by nine respondents, and “Bachelor’s degree” was selected by seven respondents. This means most respondents had at least earned their high school diploma or the equivalent, such as a GED, and the majority of the respondents had also received some college education.

Table 2.

*Means and standard deviation of level of educational attainment*

Educational Attainment	Mean	SD
Some high school	8.5	2.1

High school diploma or GED	6.4	2.7
Certification from a trade/vocational school	7.9	2.9
Some college	6.9	2.0
Associate's degree	7.6	2.3
Bachelor's degree	6.4	4.1
Graduate degree or more	9.0	N/A

*Note.* N=66

Table 2 shows the comparison between the respondents' levels of educational attainment. The answer choice, "some high school" had a mean of 8.5 and a standard deviation of 2.1. "High school diploma or GED" had a mean of 6.4 and a standard deviation of 2.7. The answer choice, "certification from a trade/vocational school" had a mean of 7.9 and a standard deviation of 2.9. With the answer choice, "some college" relating to the majority of the respondents' level of educational attainment, it had a mean of 6.9 and a standard deviation of 2.0. "Associate's degree" had a mean of 7.6 and a standard deviation of 2.3. "Bachelor's degree" had a mean of 6.4 and a standard deviation of 4.1. Lastly, the answer choice, "graduate degree or more" had one respondent, which resulted in a mean of 9.0 and no standard deviation.

The original hypothesis stated Family Fun Time Activities affect family involvement. The data supports this hypothesis because the majority of respondents reported that the Family Fun Time Activities encouraged family involvement. Further, the responses to the independent variable revealed that the respondents came from various educational backgrounds. Therefore, the families of the Head Start program presented a diverse range of educational attainment. This shows that, in this study, the parents with "some college" education were more likely to respond to the surveys and to be involved in participating in the Family Fun Time Activities with their children.

### **Qualitative Findings**

We examined the data from surveys from the years 2019, 2022, and 2023. These surveys were filled out by parents who have children in the Head Start program. After coding the open-ended questions of these surveys, we found that the Family Fun Time Activities contained three themes: children learned new skills including writing, teamwork, patience, sharing, creativity, counting, listening, and following instructions; children had fun putting the activities together, and the parents enjoyed spending time with their kids and watching them have fun while participating in educational activities; and families experienced quality time as they bonded with their children and worked together on completing the activities.

### ***Learned Skills***

Out of thirty-eight surveys, thirty mentioned the skills their child learned from participating in these activities. Respondent 2019\_06 stated, “The sugar tray was my favorite because it helped [child's name] with writing her name.” Another survey that shows the theme of the children practicing and learning new skills through completing the activities was respondent 2022\_01, who stated that their child “Practiced cutting with scissors, listening to and following instructions, and practiced counting.” This response proves that the Family Fun Time Activities can help children learn and hone a wide range of skill sets, such as active listening, reading, and fine motor skills. Lastly, respondent 2019\_05 demonstrates that learning and having fun coincide: “We learned that we can learn and have fun at the same time.” Overall, these Family Fun Time Activities taught the children new skills ranging from reading and counting to completing tasks that required fine motor skills. They also learned patience and how to share and work with others as a team.

### ***Fun and Enjoyment***

The second theme that occurred upon the completion of these Family Fun Time Activities was that the parents and the children had fun playing and being creative when participating in the activities. Out of thirty-eight surveys, thirty-two discussed that doing the activities with their child was a fun way to learn together, and they enjoyed doing the individual tasks within the activity. Respondent 2019\_11 stated, “I want to continue doing things together. My son was happy and it was fun.” Respondent 2022\_15 further shows the theme of the parents and the children enjoying participating in the activities, “Myself and 2 sons! Enjoyed the different learning outcomes that came along with the activities.” This demonstrates that the parents and children had fun learning while completing the activity. Respondent 2019\_02 stated, “It was fun playing a game with the kids helped for all of them.” This proves that the parents had fun playing with the kids while participating in the game the activity provided. Overall, these activities showed parents and children that they can learn and have fun simultaneously. Parents also realized they could enjoy participating in these activities with their children.

### ***Quality Time***

The last theme prevalent through the survey responses on Family Fun Time Activities is parental involvement and the idea of the families bonding and working together while completing the activities. Out of thirty-eight surveys, twenty-three mentioned that doing the Family Fun Time Activities allowed their family to bond and work together. Respondent 2019\_07 stated, “We enjoyed sitting down together doing the activity as a family.” Respondent 2022\_15 showed that family involvement can be educational and fun for the parents and the children, and the Family Fun Time Activities promoted family bonding, “Spending time together and doing something educational is always fun “Family Time”.” This response demonstrates the theme of parents spending time with their children when completing the activities. Finally,

Respondent 2019\_12 stated, ““Mommy and me” time with education and creative projects. My daughter had a time of laughs and learning.” This response shows that the Family Fun Time Activities encouraged this parent to experience “mommy and me” time with her daughter as they completed the activity. The daughter enjoyed learning and spending quality time with her mother. Ultimately, participating in the Family Fun Time Activities promoted family bonding by allowing parents to spend time with their children and work together.

Overall, three themes were prevalent in the Family Fun Time Activities: children learned new skills, parents, and children had fun participating in the activities and enjoyed the educational experiences, and parents received quality time with their children as they worked together, promoting family bonding. Upon evaluation of the prevalence of each theme, “Fun and Enjoyment” is the dominant theme with thirty-two out of thirty-eight total responses. In the survey responses, parents frequently mentioned how they enjoyed completing the activities with their kids as a family and that they were pleased to observe the different skills their children learned and/or practiced when participating in the activities. Based on the survey responses, the Family Fun Time Activities encouraged learning in a fun way that helped motivate family members to work together and be involved.

### **Conclusion**

The main point of this study was to assess family involvement within low-income families by sending home Family Fun Time Activities with Head Start children. This allowed for the examination of whether Family Fun Time Activities affect family involvement. Family engagement increases the likelihood of success in child development by encouraging positive behaviors and improving educational achievement. The findings from previous literature and the results of this study suggest that family involvement is beneficial for child development and

academic readiness as it encourages healthy behaviors and improves educational achievement. Further, the results of this study show that Family Fun Time Activities increased family involvement and encouraged children to meet the SMART objectives that measured educational and developmental skills

Children are very vulnerable, and adults play an active role in their maturation by having the capacity to impact their cognitive development. Family involvement is a fundamental entity that can determine a child's success from a social, mental, or educational standpoint. Today's youth and future generations make up society's foundation as it depends on them to make decisions to solidify the continuation and well-being of humanity. The Head Start program assists low-income children with their academic and social development. However, this still does not resolve the problem of these children not receiving enough support at home. Many low-income families face issues with having a lack of time and resources, which prevents them from being more involved with their children. To combat this issue, society needs to allocate more funds and supplies to provide families with adequate support in order to help their children receive the materials they need to improve their developmental and academic achievement. Children who receive sufficient parental involvement and resources have a better chance of success. Therefore, giving low-income families and children the extra support they need can help reduce economic and educational inequalities by bridging the gap between them and higher-income families.



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