

Considering Fathers in Home Visiting

Rachel Morsbach, M.A. Ed

NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations:

- Early parenthood

Systems Expertise:

- Service delivery systems
- Community resources

Direct Service Skills:

- Participation
- Advocacy

When we think of the concept of a father figure, some thoughts that possibly come to our mind of a person who has great influence upon us, takes care of us not only physically, but emotionally, and who expresses love in many different ways. Someone we would like to emulate, and who models authority. As we contemplate what father means to us personally, it may bring up many feelings, depending upon the experiences we have had, and continue to have, with a person that represents that father figure in our life. The role this person plays is immeasurable and will have lasting effects throughout our lives, whether great or small, good or bad, positive or negative.

In recent articles, most state father involvement has significantly increased over the past several decades and simultaneously has evolved into a more equal co-parenting role than in previous decades. Due to this increase, there has been more interest in studying the roles a father plays and the impact he has on his child or children. According to Children and Family Research Partnership, based out of the University of Texas Austin (2017), there are 5 things you should know about the importance of fathers engaging in the lives of children. These include involved fathers have a direct impact on their children's future and families are strengthened by supportive fathers. In addition, policies and programs specifically supporting fathers are on the rise, fathers are finding immense value from their participation in programs, and there is increasing evidence to support the impact of fathers and the effectiveness of specialized programs targeted towards fathers. Our focus this month will be on the direct impact of dads and how families are strengthened by supportive fathers.

What does it mean when involved dads have a direct impact on their children's future? Let's look at some numbers. We can see a significant influence on a child's school success when a father is more involved. For instance, children who grow up with involved fathers are: 39% more likely to earn mostly A's in school, 45% less likely to repeat a grade, 60% less likely to be suspended or expelled from school, twice as likely

to go to college and find stable employment after high school, 75% less likely to have a teen birth, and 80% less likely to spend time in jail (Child and Family Partnership, 2017).

When we consider how families are strengthened by supportive fathers, some insight that was gained regarding this particular statement included: someone who is able to support with physical and emotional needs, shows care and willingness to listen, recognizes the need to simply be present, and expresses their love and support. Promoting positive parenting helps to provide a safe environment for all those involved.

As a home visitor in New Mexico, consider these questions: what comes to mind when I think about the impact of fathers in their child's or children's lives? What family strengths have I seen when there are supportive fathers? How do I as a home visitor introduce home visiting to fathers and how can I ensure that I am including them in my visits? For fiscal year 2021, the data within Home Visiting in New Mexico shows 122 cases served with the father as the primary caregiver and 1,631 cases served with father participation (UNM, 2021). This is approximately 2 percent of the families served that have a father as the primary caregiver and approximately 28 percent of families whose fathers are participating in home visiting.

These numbers help to give us a better understanding of what the participation of fathers within our programs looks like and also provides information to support us moving forward to ensure that we are conscious about continuing to promote the importance of father involvement.

Let's ponder a few things about how to involve fathers more in your particular program. Fathers might play or engage differently than mothers, so what we may consider appropriate engagement is going to look different depending upon the father's background and circumstances. It is important to be sensitive to this as we meet with the families. A father's needs and mother's needs can vary, and being attentive to both will support our continued efforts to build that trusting relationship between all involved. The mother-father relationship is integral to the success of father engagement in home visiting. Mothers may be both gatekeepers and helpers in the relationship between a father and home visitor. Home visitors must be trained on how to navigate delicate situations (e.g., family violence, immigration status) to balance promoting father involvement while keeping mothers and children safe and comfortable (National Home Visiting Resource Center, 2019).

As a home visitor, you are in a unique position to make connections early on with all parents involved regarding the parent-child relationship and the development of their child. This is such a great opportunity and an ideal time to support fathers.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- Who do fathers turn to when they need support?
- How can a father figure immerse himself in the lives of his child or children?

- What is the comfort level of a home visitor going into a single-father household?
 - What should programs consider when assessing father readiness within their respective program?
 - How can home visitors be prepared to encourage father participation?
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References

- 5 Things You Should Know about the Importance of Fathers.* (2017). (L. B. Affairs, Producer, & The University of Texas at Austin) Retrieved from Child and Family Research Partnership: <https://childandfamilyresearch.utexas.edu/5-things-you-should-know-about-importance-fathers>
- Cradle to Career Policy Institute. (2021). *New Mexico Home Visiting Annual Outcomes Report Fiscal Year 2021.* Annual , University of New Mexico, New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, Santa Fe.
- Sandstrom, H. &. (2019, April 16). *Father Engagement in Home Visiting: Benefits, Challenges, and Promising Strategies.* (National Home Visiting Resource Center) Retrieved from National Home Visiting Resource Center Research Snapshot Brief: <https://www.nhvrc.org/wp-content/uploads/NHVRC-Brief-041519-FINAL.pdf>

Resources

Fathers New Mexico. <https://www.fathersnewmexico.org/>

Groundworks New Mexico. <https://www.groundworksnm.org/nonprofit-directory/nonprofit/43566>