

# Engaging Latino fathers into early head start: A review of the literature

Ignacio D. Acevedo-Polakovich\*, Hannah E. Spring, Sara T. Stacy, Erica A. Nordquist, Mary M. Normand

Michigan State University, Department of Psychology, United States

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## ABSTRACT

In the United States (U.S.), Early Head Start programs provide important services and resources that can benefit children and families. While additional benefits occur when these programs engage fathers, Early Head Start has historically experienced challenges engaging fathers, generally, and Latino fathers in particular. Identifying practices that successfully engage Latino fathers is particularly important as Latinas/os account for more than half of the U.S. population growth since 2000. We reviewed the relevant research and evaluation literature, identifying 23 engagement practices with some degree of empirical support. These practices highlight the roles of organizational change and of cultural responsiveness in engaging U.S. Latino fathers. Our discussion focuses on the implications of these findings for research and practice.

## 1. Introduction

In the United States (U.S.), Early Head Start programs promote school readiness in young children from low-income families by facilitating family involvement in education, health, social, and other services. With funding, training, and oversight provided by the federal government, these programs are operated in U.S. communities by 1700 public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies who serve more than a million families each year (Office of Head Start, 2017).

Early Head Start can have meaningful positive effects on children and families. For example, Love et al. (2002) reported on the findings of an experimental study of 3001 families across 17 sites who were randomly assigned to either Early Head Start or a control group that could not receive Early Head Start services (but could receive other community services). After randomization, families in both groups were assessed at regular intervals until their children's third birthday. Results pointed to significant benefits of Early Head Start for children and their parents. Among children, assignment to Early Head Start was associated with significantly higher cognitive development by age two, and higher language and emotional development at age three. Among parents, assignment to Head Start was associated with a significant increase in job attainment within 26 months since randomization, and with significantly reduced likelihood of fathers' spanking their children.

### 1.1. Father engagement in early head start

Fathers' engagement in Early Head Start can have unique beneficial

effects for children (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). For example, when unengaged fathers of Head Start children received an engagement intervention, the children of fathers who became more engaged had academic and behavioral improvements that were not observed among the children of fathers that remained unengaged (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). The findings from research into father engagement in Head Start align with those of developmental studies, which consistently find that father engagement in child rearing yields positive benefits to their children (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Given these beneficial effects, it is unfortunate that—compared to mothers—fathers are relatively uninvolved in Early Head Start. While up to 73% of children enrolled in Head Start have a father or father figure in their lives (Burwick, Bellotti, & Nagatoshi, 2004), mothers are the primary parent involved in Head Start for about 96% of these children (Love et al., 2002).

Within the last decade and a half, significant efforts have been made by policy makers, practitioners, and researchers to identify strategies that increase father involvement in Head Start. For example, the U.S. Administration on Children, Youth and Families funded 21 demonstration projects, selected through a competitive process, to develop and implement practices that increase father engagement in Early Head Start programs (Burwick et al., 2004). Relatedly, scholars and evaluators have developed approaches to conceptualize and assess the engagement of fathers into Head Start programs. For example, Raikes et al. (2002) have developed a conceptual model and measurement approach focused on programs' father-friendliness. Together, the efforts of these various stakeholders have led to foundational insights regarding the engagement of fathers. These include the understanding

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [idadap@msu.edu](mailto:idadap@msu.edu) (I.D. Acevedo-Polakovich).

that father engagement is a process that occurs across a continuum, that it is facilitated by intentional efforts such as increasing program goals and program targeting fathers, and by ensuring that father engagement activities target nonresident as well as resident fathers (Raikes et al., 2002).

### 1.2. Limited insights into the service engagement of Latino fathers

Unfortunately, not all families have benefited equally from these important insights. Latino fathers, in particular, have been less successfully engaged into Head Start than fathers from other ethnic or racial groups (Burwick et al., 2004; Campos, 2008; Moodie & Ramos, 2014). For example, when 216 Head Start programs were surveyed to examine father engagement, those serving Latinas/os encountered significantly more barriers to engagement than those serving other ethnic or racial groups (Raikes et al., 2002). The difficulties encountered by programs that hope to engage Latino fathers partly result from the barriers to program involvement that, compared to the average US father, Latino fathers disproportionately encounter. These include socioeconomic constraints, work-family conflicts, and a greater likelihood of having reduced English proficiency (Campos, 2008; Moreno & Chuang, 2015).

Although experts suggest that crafting Head Start programs that respond to US Latino fathers' needs can increase these fathers' service engagement (Sandstrom et al., 2015), few studies have operationalized and tested this suggestion (Campos, 2008; Moodie & Ramos, 2014). The lack of studies examining the engagement of U.S. Latino fathers is partly driven by an overall underrepresentation of Latinas/os' in research (Campos, 2008; Ceballo, 2004). It is also influenced by the state of father engagement research, in which systemic evaluations are rare, randomized clinical trials are scarce, and glaring gaps exist in the understanding of low-income and non-White fathers (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

Identifying approaches that successfully engage Latino fathers is particularly important as Latinas/os account for more than half of the U.S. population growth since 2000, and for about 17% of its population (Steppler & Lopez, 2016). In order to facilitate needed research and practice, we reviewed the relevant research and evaluation literature with the goal of identifying promising practices for the engagement of U.S. Latino fathers into early Head Start programs.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Literature search

We used a systematic literature search process informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & Prisma Group, 2009) statement to identify relevant sources. Although PRISMA is designed for use in reviews of randomized trials, it can be adapted to report on other types of research. Fig. 1 presents a summary of our adaptation. As illustrated, our first step was to search electronic databases (e.g.,

EBSCOhost, ProQuest, PsycINFO, etc.) using rational combinations of the terms “Latino” “Hispanic,” “fatherhood,” “engagement,” and “intervention.” In order to identify as many sources as possible, we did not impose date restrictions. Our initial search yielded 1639 results. After eliminating duplicates, 361 papers remained eligible for consideration. We then preliminarily screened each paper to determine its likelihood of meeting two inclusion criteria<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) Use of qualitative or quantitative methods to identify a practice (broadly defined) to increase fathers' or families' engagement into Early Head Start;
- (2) Either focused specifically on Latino fathers, or disaggregated the data for Latino fathers, or exceeded a minimum threshold of Latino fathers in its sample (i.e., 26%).

This screening rendered 12 sources likely to meet inclusion criteria. We then identified eight additional sources likely to meet inclusion criteria in the reference sections of these 12, and 7 additional sources by using electronic databases to locate papers citing these 12. Our final step was to thoroughly review each of the 27 sources identified as likely to meet inclusion criteria. Sources were excluded if they:

- (1) Focused on programs other than Early Head Start (e.g., parent training).
- (2) Focused on general parenting practices within an Early Head Start population.

This resulted in the elimination of 22 papers, rendering a final list of 5 sources. These sources, and some of their key features, are summarized in Table 1.

### 2.2. Literature review

We examined the 5 sources meeting inclusion criteria guided by Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) four step content analysis approach, designed to guide the trustworthy identification of themes and patterns in collections of text (e.g., articles, transcripts, etc.). A preliminary step in this approach is selecting the unit level at which text will be analyzed. Guided by Graneheim and Lundman's suggestion that the unit level must provide the necessary context to adequately interpret results, we selected to analyze the data by source. Graneheim and Lundman's first analytical step involves reviewing each analytical unit to identify specific meaning units. Given the purpose of this paper, we each independently reviewed each source to identify engagement practices, defined as discrete actions to engage Latino fathers into Early Head Start programs. At this step, we identified 45 such practices.

The second analytical step of Graneheim and Lundman's approach involves grouping meaning units—in this case engagement practices—into tentative subcategories. In this step, we compared our original results and combined closely-related practices (e.g., “Father-mother relationship development interventions” and “Co-parenting interventions” into the singular practice “Provide partner-focused services that involve Latino fathers”), reducing the number of practices to 23. Graneheim and Lundman's third analytical step is to reorganize—if necessary—tentative subcategories into emerging categories. According, we tentatively grouped the condensed list of 23 practices into categories (e.g., community participation, communication, increased service array) in order to facilitate a more cohesive, integrated understanding of practices to engage Latino fathers into family support programs.

The final analytical step of Graneheim and Lundman's approach

<sup>1</sup> Our original goal was to review only published, peer-reviewed papers reporting on evaluations of practices to increase Latino fathers' engagement in Early Head Start. This goal had to be modified after our initial efforts identified very few such papers.

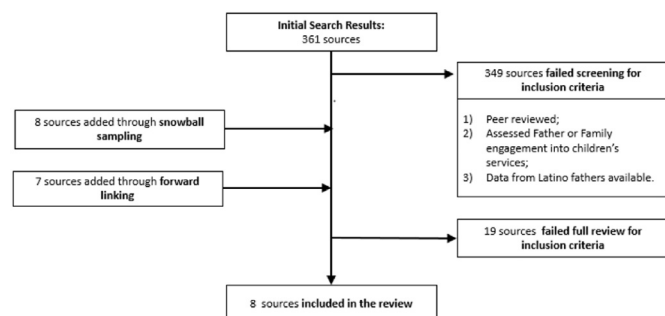


Fig. 1. Source identification process.

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