

Promoting school readiness through parental engagement

Helena Duch

Helena Duch is Assistant Professor of Population and Family Health at the Columbia University Medical Center.

Poverty tends to be associated with myriad risk factors, including single parenthood, low maternal education, residential mobility, substance abuse, and lack of social support. The effect of these risk factors on child cognitive outcomes may be mitigated by positive parenting behaviors, suggesting that parenting is a key area for social policy around school readiness.¹ While preschool programs can certainly have a large effect on school readiness, programs that target parents as well as teachers have the potential to achieve better school readiness outcomes than either type of intervention alone. Few current programs focus on the home and school environments with equal emphasis. This article presents evidence from two programs for low-income families that are designed to promote school readiness through parental engagement.

The Getting Ready for School program

There are a set of cognitive, social, and emotional skills that are necessary for children to enter school ready to learn. These school-readiness skills create the foundation for academic success, physical and mental health, and general well-being. As Ariel Kalil pointed out in her article, socioeconomic disadvantage often leads to large gaps in the development of school-readiness skills. Kimberly Noble and I are the principal investigators of an evaluation of the Getting Ready for School program, which aims to promote three factors of school readiness: literacy, math, and self-regulation (executive functioning and emotional regulation), and to help close these gaps.

In this article, I will focus on the parent component, which evolved over the course of program development. In the first year of the program, parents were given a book of skill-building activities that they could easily do with children. There was also a series of accompanying workshops for parents who wanted to learn more about how to implement the activities. While this intervention was successful to some extent, parent uptake was low. In the second year of the program, many new items were added to give parents alternative ways to engage with the program. In selecting additional elements, we looked for those that would be scalable and easy for any preschool center to implement.

One item added to the parent component in the second year was a weekly letter from the teacher to the parents listing

three things that were being worked on with their child during that week, and identifying specific items from the activity book they could do at home that would support the classroom work. We also created a website that included all activities in the book in video format, to make it easier for low-literacy parents and visual learners to participate. Since most families did not have easy computer access, the website was available on tablets that parents could check out and take home as needed. Finally, we added “getting ready for school parties” held at pick-up times, which provided activities for parents and children to do together, and offered participation incentives such as prize raffles and food.

Parent participation did improve after these changes; in the second year, parent participation in at least one activity increased from 54 to 68 percent, and the average family participation rate over all activities increased from 13 to 20 percent. Even with this improvement, participation continued to be uneven across activities, and some families were consistently more likely to participate than others. We found no differences between the three groups by language, ethnicity, education, income-to-needs ratio, or father presence. However, those with relatively high participation rates (over 25 percent) were more likely to be full-time workers, and less likely to receive food stamps.

How important is parent participation?

Preliminary data indicate that higher parental participation is indeed associated with better child outcomes, specifically picture vocabulary, phonological awareness, social competence, and emergent reading and writing skills.² However, parent participation was not found to be associated with measures of math or child self-regulation skills. Note that these results reflect only one year of follow-up; further results with longer follow-up and a larger sample size are forthcoming. Even with these preliminary results, it is encouraging to see that participation does matter, but discouraging that participation rates remained fairly low. It is also unclear with these data what parents are doing outside the program to promote school readiness, since that was not tracked.

Increasing participation and engagement

Working with Lisa Gennetian, and building on our early results, we used principles of behavioral economics to target two primary behaviors: parent attendance at Get Ready for School kickoff sessions, and the amount of time spent on Get Ready for School activities outside the classroom. We looked for simple interventions that would make it easier for families to participate. For the kickoff sessions, half of the parents received paper invitations in an envelope with

personalized handwritten information; these invitations were followed by a text message reminder. To improve parent follow-through with activities outside the classroom, families in half of the classrooms received a tracking sheet and stickers that they could use to record activities. Text message reminders were also used for this purpose, and recognition was given to the best-performing classroom. Early results for these simple and inexpensive additional steps show both higher attendance at kickoff sessions and more time spent on activities outside the classroom.

A different approach

While it is promising to see positive results from relatively simple and low-cost interventions, there may still be a place for more intensive and expensive programs aimed at promoting parenting skills. These programs could be targeted, rather than universal, and part of a multi-tiered approach that offers additional services to families who need them. An example of such an intervention is the CARING preschool program, a 12-week parent-child intervention aimed at improving children's social-emotional outcomes through helping parents learn how to support creative expressive play at home. CARING uses trained facilitators with a mental health background, and is considerably more expensive to run than the Getting Ready for School program. The CARING intervention is being evaluated with a randomized control study in two Head Start sites in New York City. Preliminary outcomes show significant but small positive effects on a number of outcomes including maternal sensitivity and cognitive stimulation of the child during play.

Next steps

Research on promoting school readiness through parental engagement is ongoing, and a number of questions remain. Even with all the behavioral strategies we are using in the Getting Ready for School program, we still have relatively low parent participation. We have conducted focus groups and done qualitative work, and are still seeking creative strategies to better reach the low participators. Our intervention is very balanced between math, literacy, and self-regulation, but we found the largest effect on literacy; it would be useful to learn more about parent-child interactions at home so that we are better able to tailor the program to achieve comparable gains in the other two areas. A survey of families in our study revealed that 77 percent accessed Facebook on a daily basis, suggesting that more work could be done to explore the role that social media could play in parental engagement. Finally, more work could be done to explore whether and how community-level multi-tiered interventions, using universally applied low-cost interventions (such as Getting Ready for School), could

be combined with targeted intensive interventions (such as CARING) to effectively engage parents in vulnerable populations. ■

¹N. J. Cabrera, J. Fagan, V. Wight, and C. Schadler, "Influence of Mother, Father, and Child Risk on Parenting and Children's Cognitive and Social Behaviors," *Child Development* 82, No. 6 (November/December 2011): 1985–2005.

²Picture vocabulary and phonological awareness were assessed with tests; social competence and emergent reading and writing scores were based on teacher reports.