

Parenting Education Programs: Recruiting and Retaining Low-income Parents and Family Caregivers

Susan Gamble

Extension Assistant Professor and Literacy Agent
West Virginia University Extension

Stacey Harper

Extension Assistant Professor and State Specialist
West Virginia University Extension

Kimary McNeil

Extension Associate Professor and Nicholas County Agent
West Virginia University Extension

Allison Nichols

Extension Associate Professor and State Specialist
West Virginia University Extension

Kerri Wade

Extension Assistant Professor and Kanawha County Agent
West Virginia University Extension

Shirley Wilkins

Extension Associate Professor and Pocahontas County Agent
West Virginia University Extension

Abstract

Family involvement in children's learning has a positive impact on children's literacy and overall academic skills. Notably, when families from low-income backgrounds are involved in their children's early literacy development, the achievement gap is narrowed. Recruiting and retaining low-income parents and family caregivers for parenting and early literacy programs are challenges faced by many organizations. Based on the experience of Extension educators in

West Virginia, this article presents the results of a qualitative study that examined (1) what attracts parents and family caregivers of young children to community-based parenting programs, (2) what motivates parents to continue in the program, and (3) what are the components of educational programs for low-income parents or caregivers that result in positive outcomes for families? Recommendations for designing and implementing programs for low-income parents are offered.

Keywords: Literacy, family involvement, low-income

Introduction

Family educational involvement makes a difference in academic achievement for low-income children. Greater parental involvement is associated with stronger pre-literacy skills (Arnold et al. 2008) as well as with predicted improvements in children's perceptions of competency in literacy and mathematics (Dearing et al. 2008). Although there is an achievement gap in average literacy performance between children of more and less educated mothers when family involvement levels are low, this gap disappears when family involvement levels are high (Dearing et al. 2006).

It seems reasonable to assume that if parents can be persuaded to get involved in their children's educational activities early in their lives, those children will be more likely to reach their potential in school (Darling 2008). Often, however, low-income parents are reluctant to get involved in schools, particularly large schools, because their own experiences were negative or because they lack the social skills needed to interact with teachers and others who are better educated (Westergard and Galloway 2004). Many low-income parents assume that they are not as welcome or as privileged in the schools as are middle-class parents (Lott 2003). In one study, researchers conclude that the solution could be fairly simple, "Some parents need a few tools to help them maximize their children's education, while others who struggle with literacy problems of their own need more intensive services"(Darling 2008).

The question that remains is how can we best give parents the tools they need? We know that it involves more deeply understanding what motivates low-income parents to seek out help with child raising activities and what persuades them to keep on pursuing knowledge and skills. To this end, after several years of implementing a literacy program for parents of pre-school children with a strong evaluation component, a group of rural, county-based Extension educators in West Virginia designed a qualitative research study to examine the following: (1) what attracts parents and guardians of young children to community-based parenting programs, (2) what motivates parents to continue in the program, and (3) is there evidence that well-designed educational programs for low-income parents produce positive outcomes for families?

WEST VIRGINIA CONTEXT

West Virginia is an appropriate place to study the response of low-income parents and family caregivers to community education programs because it is a small, rural, and economically depressed state. Population earnings are well below the national average with a ranking of 49th in 2006 (the year the research was conducted). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006), the average weekly wage in West Virginia was \$599. That is \$185 less than the national average in the year 2006. According to the *2006 Kids Count Data Book* (2007), 52.8 percent of public school students in West Virginia receive free or reduced-price meals, an indicator often used to measure poverty rates when income data is not available. Only 5.35 percent of the population is non-white (U.S. Census Bureau) and only one-third of eligible West Virginia children are enrolled in pre-school education programs. (West Virginia ranks 49th in number of children in preschool education).

A group of West Virginia University Extension educators offered a program called Family Storyteller. Designed by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Family Storyteller is a family literacy program for parents and other caregivers of pre-kindergarten children. The goals of the program are to enrich parent/child reading interaction in the home environment and to enhance the language and learning skills of both the parent and child (Weigel et al. 2001). A series of 90-minute workshops improves reading behaviors of parents with their children, increases the frequency of parents' reading with their children, and increases children's enjoyment of reading as reported by the parents.

West Virginia University Extension Service adapted the curriculum to accommodate low-resource families in rural Appalachia. Extension educators recruited parents and caregivers by going to sites where rural parents can typically be found, such as HeadStart programs, Starting Point centers, libraries and the Department of Health and Human Services. Family Storyteller programs in West Virginia are often conducted at these locations, or at a local community center or elementary school. To overcome barriers to joining social groups and ensure consistent participation, sessions are limited to 10 families, which allows interaction between participants and encourages them to get to know each other and share experiences. Led by a trained, local facilitator, adults learn and practice reading strategies while children are engaged in age-appropriate learning activities. At the end of each session, the adults and children are reunited so adults can practice the reading strategies. To encourage families to continue the reading experience at home, each family is provided with a weekly featured book and related educational materials.

These efforts have resulted in pre/post evaluation data that indicate significant improvement in reading behaviors of adult participants and an increase in the amount of time spent reading to their children. Knowing that the program worked was not enough for these Extension educators;

they wanted to know why it worked. The research study presented in this paper was conducted separately from the program's evaluation procedures, and followed a research protocol that included a randomized, stratified, sample of program participants who had met attendance standards. The research question is, "What components of parenting programs attract low-income parents or family caregivers, maintain regular attendance, and result in positive outcomes for families?"

METHODOLOGY

To explore why low-income parents and family caregivers of young children elected to come to Family Storyteller classes of their own accord, attended regularly, participated enthusiastically, and practiced the skills they learned in class at home with their children, a research team talked to participants regarding their views about education for themselves and their families.

Using a qualitative design, researchers interviewed a random selection of 44 participants from 20 West Virginia counties. The West Virginia University Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol. Participants were interviewed six months to two years following participation in the program. Prior to the interview date, participants received a letter explaining the details of the project. All interviews were conducted by telephone by a person whom the interviewee would not associate with the program. The interviews were voice recorded, and notes were taken by the interviewer. All tapes were transcribed and used as the data source for analysis.

The qualitative analysis method used in this study involved the division of the data into relevant and meaningful groups while maintaining a connection to the whole (Gredler 1996). Researchers reviewed the transcripts, identified major themes, and developed a coding system. Transcripts were coded to identify patterns emerging across the data, and then re-coded for inter-rater reliability. The results were entered into *Ethnograph*, a qualitative data software, which generated reports by major themes. Researchers further analyzed the themes, developed findings and conclusions, and reached consensus on the validity of the findings.

The accuracy of the audiotape transcription might have been affected by the quality of the audio tape, the clarity of a respondent's diction and the transcriber's familiarity with a respondent's accent or speech patterns. Some errors could have occurred in the data transcript. A high degree of accuracy was achieved by the simultaneous review of audiotape and transcripts by the nine-member research team, which reviewed the data, developed the codes and determined the conclusions.

SAMPLE

The research team interviewed a random sample (n=44) of Family Storyteller participants who had attended at least four of the six program sessions. Almost all were white non-Hispanic (97.7 percent), which is reflective of the 4 percent minority rate of the state, females (93 percent), and represented 20 counties throughout West Virginia. Almost half of the participants (47.7 percent) reported that their age was between 21 and 30. In addition, 56.4 percent said that their highest educational level was a high school diploma or GED. With regard to income, 25.7 percent reported an annual income of \$10,000 to \$20,000 and 22.9 percent reported \$30,000 to \$40,000 annually. When the size of the household is factored in (over half or 53.8 percent reported either four or five people living in the house), this population falls within the 2009 low-income levels published by the U.S. Department of Education (\$33,075 for a family of four and \$38,685 for a family of five).

RESULTS

Answers to all interview questions were coded based on three major constructs or themes: 1) motivation (what motivates low income parents and caregivers to enroll in the program); 2) compliance (what keeps low income parents and caregivers coming week after week); and 3) impact (how do low income parents behave differently after participating in the program).

With regard to the first construct, motivation for enrolling, all (100%) of the 44 interviewees indicated that they enrolled in the Family Storyteller program, not for themselves, but rather for the benefit of their children. Interviewees cited school and/or reading readiness, as the most prominent benefit for children and socialization opportunities for their children as the second most prominent motivation. Additionally, some indicated a secondary motivator was knowledge and skill attainment for themselves, the parents or caregivers.

Motivation for enrolling: Helping children get ready to learn to read and/or go to school.

Twenty-two, or 50 percent, of the comments were about helping children learn. The following quotes from interviewees illustrate this finding.

- "My daughter really needed that [the Family Storyteller program] for early reading skills."
- "I thought it [the Family Storyteller program] would be helpful. It is a good way to encourage reading."

- "We thought this [the Family Storyteller program] would be a step in the right direction to get her introduced to reading a book."
- "My daughter was getting ready to start pre-school and I thought that would be a good time where she would be listening to someone other than me and away from me for a little while. "

Motivation for enrolling: Providing socialization for the children.

Sixteen, or 36 percent, of the comments were about wanting children to have an opportunity to meet and play with other children. The following quotes illustrate this finding:

- "So my child can read and interact with other children through the program [Family Storyteller] because they were involving the children too."
- [I joined] "mostly for the playtime with other children, since she is an only child."
- "Little girl says "can we do it, can we do it" and I said sure. So we did and had a great time."

Motivation for enrolling: Increasing one's own knowledge and skills.

Four or 9 percent of the comments were about gaining knowledge and skills for oneself. It should be noted, that when referring to what they eventually gained from the program, participants cited gaining knowledge and skills far more frequently. The following quotes illustrate the finding that parents and caregivers joined the program because they wanted to enhance their own understanding of how to help their children learn:

- "I thought it was a good opportunity to see how someone else would tell me how to read to my child. I can read to a child but they aren't going to get it unless you do it in a good way."
- "I wasn't sure I was doing all the right things [to help my child learn]."
- "We chose to do it as our class. Our kids are in pre-school, and the moms get to pick the activities we want to do. "

Since all of the interviewees had attended the Family Storyteller program at least four times we knew that they had complied with attendance expectations. The study looked at why these participants continued to attend despite the stresses and strains imposed on the lives of low income parents and caregivers. The four reasons for continuing to attend the sessions of Family Storyteller were: 1) feeling free to share with others in similar situations, 2) enjoyment

experienced by the children, 3) an opportunity for quality family time, 4) gain of new knowledge and skills.

Reason for continuing to attend: Participants learned from, and shared with, others in similar life situations.

Twenty-one, or 48 percent, of the respondents said they continued to come to the Family Storyteller program because it was an opportunity to share their story and learn from others in similar life circumstances. The setting was a safe place for sharing and learning. The following quotes illustrate this finding.

- “Everyone was very friendly, cooperative, supportive. No one acted better than anyone else. We all seemed like family. Everyone shared their views with the storyteller when she asked questions and stuff. It was really nice.”
- “You are going to have problems that everyone will face, and maybe everyone doesn’t know how to handle them, and someone else could give you advice.”
- “I think it gives everyone a voice and an opinion. You can relate to each other about different ideas on a situation or setting, and help each other get support or gain support also.”
- “I think any time you have a chance to share ideas and have a discussion with other parents on what works for them, what they try and what you try. Parenting is like being pecked to death by a bunch of chickens, and you need all the help you can get to corral those chickens. You can get ideas from other parents that work well for them. We are running from here to there and don’t have a chance to sit down and focus on things like this. I think it’s a good opportunity.”

Reason for continuing to attend: It was enjoyable for the children.

Participants continued to attend Family Storyteller because their children were having fun. Fifteen, or 34 percent, of the comments were about how much the children enjoyed coming to the program. The following quotes illustrate this finding:

- “Because she enjoyed it [the Family Storyteller program], I enjoyed it, so we kept going.”
- “She knew every week what day it was and she really looked forward to going. She loved it [the Family Storyteller program].”

- “My son really liked it [the Family Storyteller program]. He was at the age where he was not in preschool or anything, and it was something just for him.”

Reason for continuing to attend: Opportunity for quality family time.

Seven, or 16 percent, of the comments dealt with quality family time. The following quotes illustrate the finding that participants looked forward to attending Family Storyteller because the program included joint activities for parent and child.

- “My husband and I got to come together and our daughter got to play with the other kids, and we could do the activities together. It was a good family time.”
- [I came to Family Storyteller because] “I wanted to spend extra time with my daughter.”
- “It was time we could spend together. It gave good tools that she could use, tools that she and her Mom could use at home also, along with me [grandmother] at times, but things that could help her get more involved in reading. “
- “Actually, my whole family went. Me, my husband, son and two daughters.”

Reason for continuing to attend: Adult participants gained new knowledge or skills.

Parents learned new techniques. Ten, or 23 percent, of the comments were related to learning new reading techniques. The following quotes illustrate this finding.

- “When they [the Family Storyteller facilitators] did things differently, it was just interesting to see that people do things differently. If I had a question, I would ask, but most of the time they would tell during the demonstration.”
- “I picked up on everyone else’s ideas. This was my first time. Everyone had so many great ideas. I am kind of creative, but I just watched them, since it was their second year and they knew what was going on.”
- “I have a grandson who is in special needs preschool. We always like to learn as much as we can and get ideas about things to do with him. ”
- The third construct, impact on the behavior of the parents, was measured by di

The third construct, impact on the behavior of the parents, was measured by dissemination of knowledge and promotion of the program.

Evidence of impact: Participants passed new knowledge and skills on to others.

There were more than 75 comments about how participants passed knowledge or skills to others in their home and community environment. Of those, more than a third of the comments specifically mentioned the person or persons who received the information or skill. These included husbands, older children, mothers and other relatives, friends, and teachers. The following quotes illustrate that participants passed on reading techniques to others.

- “My oldest daughter likes to read to the little one. She is really animated while she reads.”
- “My husband will now read, but wouldn’t before. He points to words and asks questions about the different pictures and recognized the authors.”
- I told them [my parents and my sister] so that when they read to the kids that they would kinda use the same stuff that I did with them.”
- “I guess I talked to and showed the materials to my sister. We would speak of it and that we recommended it and really enjoyed it.”

Evidence of impact: Participants cited reasons why others should attend too.

Five, or about 11 percent, of the interviewees mentioned that they had recommended the program to others. Quotes that illustrate participants desire to promote the program to others include:

- “I just thought her kids would enjoy it [the Family Storyteller program]. I told her it was a lot of fun.”
- “I just think it was an excellent program. I had never been involved with anything like this before, and I would love the chance to do it with my other children.”
- “I would recommend anyone with children that age to participate, enjoy them, and enjoy helping them do something that they will need for the rest of their lives.”
- [I talked to] “a friend who was very interested, so hopefully I can invite her next time if you do it again.”

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What motivates low-income families to attend a community-based educational program?

The research revealed that low-income parents and family caregivers attend parenting programs because they are interested in promoting their children's learning and educational enrichment. What parents found most enticing about Family Storyteller was including the child as an active component of the program; they believed that the intended audience of the program was the child instead of the adult. Family Storyteller was designed to teach parents effective early literacy strategies for their children. Therefore, once a parent participated in the program and learned how to effectively implement the reading strategies, the parent could apply the strategies with all children and not just the one that attended Family Storyteller. However, the research contradicts this notion. The research shows that parents wanted to attend Family Storyteller again with other children, so these children could also benefit. This finding highlights the importance of incorporating a child component into parenting education programs.

What keeps parents of low-resources coming to community-based educational programs?

The results of the research discussed in this paper suggest that educational programs for low-income parents and family caregivers of young children should: 1) focus on the needs of children rather than the needs of adults; 2) give adults the opportunity to share their experiences with others in similar life situations; 3) provide a non-threatening, open environment; 4) include activities that are enjoyable and engaging for both adults and children; and 5) provide opportunities for family members to spend quality time together. Parents were consistently challenged to think about their own feelings and motivations for being involved in an educational activity that benefited their child. The program model included weekly discussion questions such as, "Who is your child's first teacher?" and "How does your child learn?" as a way to create a non-threatening environment allowing the participants to feel free to express their opinions and share life experiences.

What are the components of programs for low-resource parents that result in long-term benefits for families?

Programs resulting in long-term benefits for low-income parents and their families are those that include an opportunity for participants to practice new skills in the training session and encourage participants to model their new behaviors at home. Many of the participants in the Family Storyteller program transferred their new behaviors to older siblings, to fathers, and other close associates. Fathers who read to their young children are enhancing their child's reading

potential in later life. In one study, paternal book reading predicted children's language outcomes, particularly for fathers who had a high school education (Duursma 2008).

Recommendations for practice

1. When recruiting low-income parents and family caregivers for a parenting education program, focus on the opportunities for children rather than adults. Recruitment materials should emphasize the direct benefit to the children, whether it is school readiness or social interaction.
2. Help participants to get to know each other and feel comfortable sharing life experiences. Learning experiences should include opportunities for peer learning activities.
3. Provide opportunities for adults to spend quality time with their children at the session, or at least, give them suggestions for improving their time with their children at home.
4. Make engaging activities for children an integral component of the program model. If children are having a fun learning experience they are more likely to encourage their parents to attend subsequent sessions.
5. Provide opportunities for participants to practice learned behaviors. These exercises will help participants feel more confident about their skill level and be more likely to use the behavior at home. Family Storyteller participants modeled their new reading behaviors at home, and as a result, others in their families also learned and improved their reading behaviors.

Recommendations for research

1. This study does not examine how long-term contact with participants would result in improved reading behaviors and more frequent transfer of skills to close associates. An example of this approach is an intervention program for young parents that followed up on participants in the class sessions with visiting mentors (Dieterich et al. 2006). That program resulted in increases in verbal and cognitive score gains. More research needs to be done to confirm the benefits of long-term contact with participants in community-based educational programs for low-income families.
2. This study did not examine how reading intimacy had an impact on relationships with children and improved reading behavior both by parents and children. The reading behaviors taught in Family Storyteller program incorporate physical closeness and

emotional connection. In fact, the affective quality of the reading interaction has been found to be the most powerful predictor of children's motivations for reading in another study (Sonnenschein and Munsterman 2002). Another study looked at the effect of mother-child warmth and conflict in association with family involvement in children's education and kindergartners' mathematics and literacy achievement (Simpkins et al. 2006) and found that child outcomes associated with family educational involvement in the school vary based on the positive nature of the mother. Further research might examine the effect of reading intimacy, such as that taught in the Family Storyteller program, on the development of literacy skills in young children of low-income parents and caregivers.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, D.H., A. Zeljo, G. L. Doctoroff, and C. Ortiz. 2008. Parent involvement in preschool: Predictors and the relations of involvement to pre-literacy development. *School Psychology Review*, 37(1), 74-90.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. *County employment and wages in West Virginia: Third quarter 2007*. http://stats.bls.gov/ro3/fax_9626.htm
- Darling, S. 2008. Family must be a part of the solution in closing the achievement gap. *Clearing House*, 81(6), 245-246.
- Dearing, E., H. Kreider, S. Simpkins, and H. B. Weiss. 2006. Family involvement in school and low-income children's literacy: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(4), 653-664.
- Dearing, E., H. Kreider, and H. B. Weiss. 2008. Increased family involvement in school predicts improved child-teacher relationships and feelings about school for low-income children. *Marriage & Family Review*, 43(3/4), 226-254.
- Dieterich, S. E., S. H. Landry, K. E. Smith, P. R. Swank, and H. M. Hebert. 2006. Impact of community mentors on maternal behaviors and child outcomes. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 28(2), 111-124.
- Duursma, E., B. A. Pann, and H. Raikes. 2008. Predictors and outcomes of low-income fathers' reading with their toddlers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 23(3), 351-365.
- Gredler, M. E. 1996. *Program evaluation: data analysis and interpretation*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall.

Lott, B. 2003. Recognizing and welcoming the standpoint of low-income parents in the public schools. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation*, 14(3),

Simpkins, S. D., H. B. Weiss, K. McCartney, H. M. Kreider, and E. Dearing. 2006. Math and science motivation: A longitudinal examination of the links between choices and beliefs. *Parenting: Science & Practice*, 6(1), 49-57.

Sonnenschein, S. and K. Munsterman. 2002. The influence of home-based reading interactions on 5-year-olds' reading motivations and early literacy development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(3), 318-337.

U.S. Department of Education, 2009. Office of Postsecondary Education. Federal TRIO programs 2009 annual low income levels. <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/incomelevels.html>. Accessed on May 5, 2009.

Weigel, D., P. Behal, G. Jackson, S. Martin, K. McGee, P. Miller et al. 2001. Family Storyteller: A resource manual for facilitators. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

West Virginia Kids Count Fund. 2007. *2007 West Virginia Kids Count Data Book: The Early Child Development Story in West Virginia*. Charleston: West Virginia KIDS COUNT Fund.

Westergard, E. and D. Galloway. 2004. Parental disillusionment with school: prevalence and relationship with demographic variables, and phase, size and location of school. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*; 48(2), 189-204.

Cite this article:

Susan Gamble, Stacey Harper, Kimary McNeil , Allison Nichols , Kerri Wade, and Shirley Wilkins. 2009. **Parenting education programs: Recruiting and retaining low-income parents and family caregivers.** *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 14 (2).