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# Fathers with low literacy and their young children

*Fathers in this study valued literacy learning. They monitored their children's progress and participated in book reading despite low direct program involvement.*

**T**he role of parents in children's literacy development has been well documented (Morrow, 1989; Sulzby & Edwards, 1993). Prior home literacy studies tended to focus on maternal influences in young children's literacy learning (Dickinson, De Temple, & Smith, 1992; Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, & Brody, 1990). Interest in the father's role in the lives of children has increased, and men have responded to the changes within U.S. society by assuming roles as nurturing caregivers and active teachers of their children (Lamb, 1997).

Studies have shown that fathers can have remarkable effects on children's literacy and school achievement. The 1996 National Household Education Survey (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997) indicated that children are more likely to get A's, participate in extracurricular activities, and enjoy school and are less likely to repeat a grade if their fathers are involved in their schools. Gallimore, Reese, Balzano, Benson, and Goldenberg (1991) saw a positive relationship between the amounts of literacy fathers engage in for their personal use and their children's reading test scores. Laosa (1982) found that fathers had more effect on their sons' reading achievement than mothers did.

A particular paternal influence is expectation for children's future achievement. In a report on intergenerational literacy programs, Nickse (1990) noted that parental attitude toward education and aspirations for the child, in

addition to conversations and reading materials in the home, contribute more directly to early reading achievement than socioeconomic status. Ortiz, Stile, and Brown (1999) found that interest in school readiness and a desire for a closer relationship with their children motivated father-child literacy activities.

Levels of fathers' literacy involvement with their preschoolers vary. Several factors contribute to this. Parents with a higher education tend to participate in more child literacy activities than less educated parents (Laosa, 1982). Spousal roles are another factor. Levine, Murphy, and Wilson (1993) suggested that "how men relate to children is influenced by how they think and feel about their role" (p. 9). Ortiz (1996) reported that fathers who shared child rearing responsibilities with their spouses were more likely to read to their children. It may be that fathers with more traditional role definitions tend to delegate these activities to mothers.

What about fathers whose early experiences with literacy and school were discouraging and who continue to struggle with low literacy skills? How do they view literacy experiences for their children? Do they engage in literacy activities with them as readily as other fathers? This article presents the attitudes and literacy practices of fathers with low literacy or limited academic achievement. Their attitudes toward the importance of literacy activities, the value of education, and their aspirations for themselves and their children are included.

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## Study background

Data were derived from case studies of families enrolled in an Even Start Family Literacy program in a city in north-central West Virginia, USA. The city, with a population of approximately 26,700, is home to a major state university. The city and county have experienced the decline of the coal industry, which has resulted in widespread poverty in the region. Although many people there do have jobs, many are underemployed or have transient employment.

The federally funded Even Start Family Literacy Program is designed to improve the educational opportunities of low-income families by providing early childhood education, parenting skills, and adult education. The West Virginia program components include addressing the literacy and educational needs of parents and children, training parents to be the first and primary teachers for their children, and providing skills to help parents gain self-sufficiency. Families qualify for participation in the program if (a) they have children up to age 7; (b) at least one parent needs further education to obtain employment, a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED), or literacy skills; and (c) they reside in a Head Start attendance area within the county.

The Even Start program services consist of weekly or bimonthly home visits averaging one and one half hours by a family educator trained in early childhood education who offers developmentally appropriate activities. A selection of children's books are previewed and left for families to read. Simple book extension activities such as artwork or puppet construction are begun during the home visit. The family educators model book reading but only rarely read an entire book with the child. They encourage parents to do the activities with the children. Art supplies are provided to families who have a need. The educators also link services with Head Start, Special Education, and Title I programs in the county schools. (Title I is a federally funded reading program.)

For parenting education, the educators use information from the nationally accredited "Parents as Teachers" curriculum. Adult education consists of adult basic education, computer skills, and preparation for GED or college testing. Employment counseling and preparation for interviews and job procurement are also offered. The pro-

gram coordinates with a variety of social service agencies and center-based adult and preschool education to assist families with their needs.

Each family in the study had two preschool-aged children. All parents were married, and all were European American. Each of the families qualified for food stamps and other public assistance. This report includes descriptions of two fathers from an earlier study (Karther, 1996) of three families. In that study data were collected during home visits with an initial data period and an eight-week follow-up. In the original study design, the data consisted of semistructured interviews with the mothers (Seidman, 1991) and the mothers' responses to hypothetical learning situations and to book reading with their children. Auxiliary information came from interviews with two Even Start parent educators and from Even Start home environment questionnaires and literacy tests.

The mothers and children were the primary program participants over the two months of the earlier study. The fathers had no direct Even Start program involvement and none of them participated in the parent-child activities during the home visits. However, during the data collection, the researcher noticed a father observing the home visit. The researcher decided to explore interviewing the fathers, and permission was granted through requests from their wives. Two fathers agreed to semistructured interviews.

Data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach as described by Hycner (1985), which involved identification of meaning units from carefully prepared transcripts of each taped interview. Statements were segmented, categorized, and then grouped according to similar and related meanings. Common themes and groupings were examined to determine similarities and differences.

## Portraits of the families

### *The Marsh family (pseudonyms are used for all family names)*

This family consisted of Mike, the father; Mary, the mother; a son, age 3; and a 6-month-old daughter. Mary was 19 and had been married to Mike for two years. Mike, age 22, was stepfather of the boy and natural father of the girl. The family lived in a small two-bedroom trailer

in a mobile-home park within the city limits. The living and kitchen area of the trailer contained little more than a sofa, arm chair, coffee table, TV cabinet, kitchen table, and chairs. The baby's highchair was stacked on the kitchen table when not in use. There was a fish tank in the living room. The family had a cat and a dog.

Both of the parents had high school diplomas. Mike had completed vocational education training and had been in a class for students with learning disabilities because he had "trouble with his reading." Mike reported that he "had a hard time sitting in regular class unless it was interesting." He told the researcher, "When I was younger I had so much trouble reading I didn't really push myself on to it." He proudly said that he made a 3.5 grade point average his last year of high school. Mike described his learning of auto mechanics as, "If you go in and learn the basics...then you can figure it out from there. That is the way I have always been. If I want to know how something works I tear it apart." Mike completed high school because, according to him, his parents had a rule "that you ain't leavin' home 'til you get a high school diploma."

Mike's family history revealed limited education levels. His father had quit school at age 14 to go to work in the coal mines, and his mother had been forced to quit in the ninth grade because the family couldn't afford school books. His mother's health had been frail, and Mike's sister was the homework helper for the children. From late high school, Mike had a stable work history doing auto mechanic work. He enjoyed "doing anything to be working with your hands." He had recently quit a repair shop job, where he had worked for five years, because of the night and weekend work. At the time of the study, Mike was underemployed as an auto glass installer. He was glad to have weekends and evenings free to be with his family. According to the Even Start educator, the family qualified for food stamps.

In the interview Mike expressed his plan to return to school to learn more auto body mechanics so that he could operate his own garage. Speaking with much sincerity, he described his "wild dream" of having an all-purpose shop someday. He admitted to the researcher that he wished he could start over with high school because "it would do me good. I really wish I could go through and straighten up a year or so of

classes.... Now I wish I would have kicked myself and tried to pick up an extra class." When asked about this he explained that the extra class would be math because "you need more math nowadays; it's used in auto repair work." Follow-up questions by the Even Start educator revealed that Mike had declined an offer of referral for further education and a reading test because of his full-time employment.

Child-care roles in this family were shared. Mary cared for the children during the day and was the primary teacher of the children. Mike assisted her in the evenings with some of the physical caregiving. This was reported on the HOME Screening Questionnaire (Coons, Gay, Fandal, Ker, & Frankenburg, 1981). Specific tasks for each parent were not reported.

*Even Start involvement.* The family heard about Even Start from a neighbor and enrolled because of Mary's desire to help her children and Mike's initial interest in furthering his education. At the initial data collection the family had received two months of Even Start services, which consisted of weekly home visits. Mike was never present during the Even Start visits because he was at work. Paperwork and adult and child testing for the national Even Start evaluation were done during the first three visits. Each intervention home visit averaged one and one half hours, in which time the parent educator did two or three literacy activities with the 3-year-old while the mother assisted. For example, one time they made stick puppets and reenacted the story of "The Three Little Pigs." After working with the child, the educator discussed Mary's questions and concerns about the children. Her main concerns were about the baby's motor development and getting her son to sleep by himself. An average of five or six children's books of the mother's choice were left with the family. One or two infant books were also left by the parent educator. Other materials such as dominoes, paints, and play clay were provided for family use.

During the home visits, Mary seemed comfortable with the parent educator and talked easily with her. Her son was very excited to see the educator and addressed her as "teacher." It was evident that the family used the books that were left for them because on one home visit the 3-year-old repeated the storylines to the parent educator and was anxious to get the "new" books for the week. The mother kept track of the

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parenting information sheets that were given to her by storing them in a notebook provided by Even Start. For a short time she recorded her son's reactions to the Even Start books. She did not continue this for more than a few weeks, however, claiming a "busy schedule."

*Initial family literacy opportunities.* Both parents indicated that before Even Start intervention they provided their son with books. At the initial data collection, they owned more than 10 children's books. The Even Start educator reported that on the HOME Screening Questionnaire they had indicated fewer than nine books for adults. The titles of these were unavailable. They purchased and borrowed preschool videotapes and also had crayons and watercolors to "help with his [their son's] learning." However, Mary reported that she monitored her son with crayons because he chewed off the paper and broke the crayons more than he drew with them. She good-humoredly showed the researcher some crayon scribbles on the furniture saying, "That is his artist job there."

The family owned some toys relating to alphabet recognition, a wooden rotating alphabet block puzzle, other blocks, toy bricks, trucks, musical toys, a toy telephone, and plastic tools. The researcher noted a small stack of women's magazines in the living room, notes posted on the refrigerator, and an appointment calendar and address book that the mother used. There was no computer in the home.

Both Mike and his wife reported valuing family times. As Mike said, "The biggest part of the time [at home] is spent with our kids.... We are not partiers or nothing.... We try to get both of them [the children] involved in something." Mike and Mary spent leisure time taking their children to a city park, and Mike reported that he enjoyed watching his son ride his bike.

*Parent-child literacy activities.* Parent-child reading was done primarily by Mary. She said that she was the main "reader" in the family. She reported that she began to read to her first child when she was pregnant; she read her high school books aloud. At the time of the first data collection, she had no regular routine reading time but responded to her son's request to read, which usually was in the afternoon when the baby was asleep. Mary did not report reading daily to her children but read several times per week. Her husband described himself as "not a book per-

son." Mike said that he "didn't read a lot" to their son but did read some books that had transportation themes. The researcher interpreted his reading to mean that he mostly showed his son the pictures in the book and discussed the trucks. Parental reading consisted of the mother scanning women's magazines for recipes and Mike reading magazines about auto electronics and equipment.

*Father's teaching behaviors.* In an attempt to understand his parental role definitions, the researcher asked Mike if he considered himself a teacher of his children. He responded with a shrug and negative nod of the head. He said with hesitation, "Hum, like I say, I try to teach them stuff. I mean I know parents that really sit down and try playing school.... I don't believe in pushing it, you know, drilling it into them, but I do want them to get a good education."

When asked what he has done to help his son learn, Mike's responses were related to his mechanical interests. He reported that he had tried to teach his son to ride a bicycle. He also allowed the child to watch him repair bikes and the car to "start him out young," to get him interested in repairing things. He had taught the child the names of his tools. Mike appreciated the child's ability to learn. As Mike said enthusiastically, "I try to teach him how, but a lot of it is him, like I said he is so curious, you just got to try and explain it to him and show him how it works."

*Father's reaction and changes after Even Start intervention.* Mike felt his 3-year-old benefited from the program. He said it encouraged the child to read more books because the Even Start books were viewed by his son as "special." Mike relayed that he was pleased that Even Start involved his wife because "she gets to do stuff with books and she's showed me stuff they've done together." He felt that Even Start helped the entire family by encouraging time together. He said, "It gives us more of something, as far as involving all of us, it gives us the chance to sit down. And he [the son] seems more interested in books.... He tells me about his teacher all of the time." He proudly showed the researcher a detailed collage that his son had made for him with the Even Start educator. Obviously glad his son made it for him, Mike said, "It makes me feel good.... I am happy to see it."

The Marshes reported that before Even Start Mary had a hard time finding something to do with her son. She was pleased to receive many activity ideas and said that her son worked on them until he ran out of supplies or completed an activity. She said that her son would “sit and do it for hours, but before the Even Start educator started coming around, it’s like ‘there’s nothing to do.’”

Both Mary and Mike felt that Even Start helped their son learn. Mary claimed that he learned his numbers from the Even Start educator. Another change for the Marsh parents was a conscientious effort to read to their children in a more systematic way, particularly at bedtime. Mike had begun reading the Curious George books with his son. He had increased book reading frequency, reading almost every day to his son. They did not, however, report an established routine to read to the infant.

Mike felt that because Even Start targeted the whole family it might help people who often ignore their children and don’t know how to communicate as a family. He explained, “it may give them a reason to start spending time with their kids” and help them “as far as learning what to do with the kids, finding what’s interesting for their kids to know.” Mike told the researcher he would have liked to be more actively involved with Even Start and suggested that home visits be scheduled at a time when he was off work. Sensing the benefit to his son, he said, “maybe that would help...keep him interested even more.”

*Value of education and aspirations for children.* Mike connected the importance of education and book reading to a brighter future. In a conversation about his hopes for his children’s future he said, “I didn’t mind being a mechanic...but when you look at your kids you always want better for them than what you are doing.” He went on to say earnestly,

but if he [his son] is going to take to books, just because I am doing something different don’t mean I won’t push him, you know, back him in what he is going to do.... If he wants to go to school I definitely, if I had to take four or five jobs to get him through I would.... I hope to see him go to college, both of them.

### *The Smith family*

Jim and his wife, Sally, had a 4-year-old daughter and 15-month-old son. Jim was 29 years old and his wife was 32. The family lived in a subsidized housing project within the city limits. Their townhouse apartment was attractively furnished with an upholstered sofa and chair and decorated with cheery pictures on the wall. They had a pet parrot in a cage in the dining room and some fish in a tank in the living room. The housing project had a large children’s playground and was centrally located to stores. The Smiths knew several residents of the community, and Jim reported assisting some neighbors with car repairs.

Sally had completed high school and training programs as a nursing assistant and medical assistant. She was taking one course in a vocational nursing program at the time of the study. Jim did not complete high school. He dropped out in the ninth grade, at age 14, after a brain injury from an auto accident. He read at the third-grade level (according to the Even Start educator). Jim had held previous jobs in maintenance and light construction. Neither parent was employed at the time of the study; they lived on public assistance.

Jim reported that in his elementary years he had speech problems; he had trouble “pronouncing my vowels and my letters.” He told the researcher that his auto injury during ninth grade “knocked his reading down” because he had been reading at a sixth-grade level before his accident. Although he received special education services at a “school for people under average” he could not regain his ability to read. Jim explained, “I didn’t exactly have any help so I got frustrated and stopped trying to learn to read.” He decided to drop out of school when they placed him in the cafeteria and gym each semester with no special assistance. Jim saw his low reading skills as a disadvantage: “If I can’t read, I can’t learn anything though. If I could read I could learn myself how to do some of those things. I could pick up a lot.”

Jim remembered that during his childhood his family lived in Baltimore, Maryland, and in West Virginia. He received limited assistance with schoolwork from his mother and said that if she had helped him more, he might have learned more. He made no mention of his father. His older sister was the one who helped him

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with homework. Jim had enrolled in adult education classes three times in Baltimore and also in West Virginia. He quit each program due to frustration. He said, "I didn't go back because it didn't seem like I was learning any more or getting any farther."

The Smiths' son was born six weeks prematurely and received early intervention services. The mother reported that his last evaluation showed him to be developing normally and above normal in gross motor skills. Their daughter was diagnosed six months prior to the study with developmental delays. The mother reported that her diagnosis was a behavior disorder and two years' developmental lag. At the time of the study, the girl was attending Head Start and receiving special services.

For the Smiths, child-care responsibilities were primarily Sally's. She took care of all of the physical needs of the children and communicated with the teachers and professionals providing services to the family. On the HOME survey she reported that Jim did caregiving three to four times per week. This was when she was in class or volunteering in her daughter's Head Start class.

*Even Start involvement.* The Smiths had received two months of Even Start services at the beginning of the study. They were referred by the Head Start staff. Sally had enrolled in Even Start to help her daughter and in hopes that Jim could receive adult education and literacy services. This family had an Even Start parent educator who visited them twice a month. Typically Sally and her daughter were the primary participants. Jim was in the apartment for about a third of the visits but never participated directly. He was observed to speak briefly with the Even Start educator on a few occasions.

During each visit, the parent educator discussed the books introduced at the previous visit. Sometimes she read one of them to the daughter. Then she did two to three book extension activities such as the stick puppet reenactment of "The Three Little Pigs." She brought toddler toys for the youngest child, and the researcher observed both children playing with them. The two children had a high interest level in the educator's activities. Their mother sat close by but did not say much to the children. She did interact with the parent educator and reported her daughter's Head Start progress. She

did not have many questions for the parent educator but did mention wanting her husband to enroll in a reading program. A second concern of hers was the daughter's emotional outbursts. The parent educator provided "Parents as Teachers" materials for her and suggested some parenting tips. The educator always left a selection of books for the 4-year-old and some for the toddler. On occasion she left other materials such as a book with an audiotape and a cassette tape player.

*Initial family literacy opportunities.* The Smiths had both children's and adult literacy materials in their home. The adult literacy materials were Sally's textbooks. Sally reported that she was the main reader in the family. On the HOME survey, she reported having over 20 adult books and 10 children's books that were stored in the children's rooms. The children's books were ones that are commonly available in grocery and chain stores. The family also had subscriptions to a children's book club and a Bible book club, and they had a Sunday newspaper subscription.

A computer was in the living room with several containers of disks. Jim explained that they had a learning program that was on alphabet and number recognition, but he really wanted to have "Reader Rabbit." The majority of the computer programs were adult recreational games, which Jim copied from friends.

The children had access to pens and pencils in the living room. On a high shelf was a basket of coloring books and crayons, which Sally controlled. On one occasion, the researcher noticed the daughter using a large pad of paper, which she labeled as her notebook. The children also had a magnetic drawing pad on which to draw and write. Many developmentally appropriate play materials were in the home. These included an alphabet toy, a pegboard, a toy telephone, musical toys, a shape sorter, play clay, blocks, a chalkboard, toy dishes, dress-up costumes, and toy bricks. The mother also let her children play with a broken clock.

*Parent-child literacy activities.* Sally provided numerous literacy activities for the children. During the first study interview, she pointed to a tape player with a recorded storybook tape in it that was on loan from Even Start and said lightheartedly that the youngest "has to listen to that tape every day—over and over."

She also said a family favorite was the Alphabet Soup game that her daughter liked to play. This game involves matching letters to object pictures. The mother began reading to her daughter when she was 2 or 3 years old. She said she usually read five or six books to her at bedtime. Her favorite books were those that had animals in them. The mother also reported showing picture books to her son.

Jim said that he read to the children infrequently. He explained that because he could not read the words, he left the reading to Sally. He did, however, enjoy showing picture books to his son when his wife was not available. According to Jim, he liked the hardback picture books "because he [his son] likes to touch them." He added that his son "sometimes gets more book reading than our daughter, but the reason is that he wants to turn the pages and look at them." The researcher noted on a home visit that the daughter's attention problems were evident when the mother and the Even Start educator tried to read to her. She looked at a book for no more than 3 minutes and then abruptly jumped down off the couch to start a new activity. This may have accounted for Jim's comments about the youngest child being more interested in the books.

*Father's teaching behaviors.* When asked if he felt he was a teacher of his children, Jim shrugged his shoulders and responded, "I try to teach her [his daughter]." Jim reported taking an active interest in teaching his daughter the alphabet. Although he added, "I don't know much about trying to teach them because I can't read." He had tried to teach her to use the alphabet recognition computer program. The researcher observed him point to an item on the screen and then encourage his daughter to say the alphabet letter and the object. This was not very successful. His daughter became easily distracted and hopped down from his lap. He expressed discouragement stating, "At first she was interested, but I can't keep her interested."

He has plans to teach his young son—like Mike Marsh—following traditional male roles. Jim explained, "When he gets a little older I could probably learn him a lot of my skills that I know because I can do anything outside from the inside and from top to bottom, from roofing to plumbing and electrical."

*Father's reaction and changes after Even Start intervention.* After a month of Even Start

services, Jim followed through on a referral to an adult literacy program. His wife reported that it was helping him improve his reading. He admitted that he would not have enrolled in another reading class on his own. Neither his wife nor his sister could persuade him in the past. He reported that he adopted a new way to help himself learn to read. He recorded his lessons on an audiocassette recorder and replayed them. He also was using the computer to learn new words. He indicated his difficulty in mastering reading by saying,

It's slow and long term. I know a lot of it is just like I am going over a track where I have been before...so after I go so far I probably will have lots of hard times. It is going to be a long time before I get to the end of the track.

He was also continuing to work with his daughter on alphabet recognition and having success with her working longer at the computer program. His success may have been a result of a change in his teaching methods. He began by slowly saying the letter and then saying the word. He also devised his own way to teach her to write the alphabet letters by tracing them on a plastic book. He recounted, "She is picking it up a little bit more. She's still—she gets wild sometimes. She thinks all time is play time. But she is still picking it up little by little. We help her learn her colors, too." Jim also had begun playing tic-tac-toe with his daughter. He initiated this game because she could not make zeros.

Jim and Sally reported reading more to their children because of Even Start. They felt they read more "because Even Start brings more books." The Even Start educator saw much more reading to their younger son because of the picture books provided. The Smiths maintained their routine of reading to their daughter at bedtime as well as reading some during the day to both children. Jim did not adopt a routine reading time, but he reported using the books more when his wife was out.

Jim was pleased that his daughter liked the program, and he felt that her attention and concentration was improving. He said, "She is listening more and she plays more with different things." The family was working on breaking their daughter's habit of crying when she didn't get her way. This situation was being improved by the Even Start educator's suggestion of using words instead of cries. Jim explained that

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this was working because “you know what it is she wants now.”

*Value of education and aspirations for children.* When asked about his hopes for his children, Jim immediately said that he wanted them to learn how to read “because that’s the biggest thing right now.” He connected it to gaining a high school diploma and obtaining employment, explaining that the “guy with the diploma” gets the job.

## Involving fathers

This study revealed insights on the attitudes and literacy practices of two low-literate fathers with their preschool-age children. Despite their own school failures and frustrations with learning, the fathers attempted to support their children’s literacy learning. Both initiated some literacy activities, such as limited book reading, prior to the family’s enrollment in the Even Start Family Literacy program. One father did active teaching of alphabet recognition. When their wives and children began in Even Start, the fathers condoned their participation; one actively monitored his child’s activities, enjoying the reports from his son.

Even Start had auxiliary effects on each father’s literacy practices by enhancing the fathers’ book use. The increased number of books available, and perhaps the children’s interest in using them, prompted the fathers to read more with their children. Because of both fathers’ limited literacy skills, their reading consisted of showing pictures to the children, which is one appropriate way to share books with preschoolers. Books with themes and stories that they liked, such as those with machines or about Curious George, and those that fit their children’s developmental level, such as hardback picture books for toddlers, were used by the fathers. These results occurred despite the fact that the fathers were not the primary parent participants in the program.

It could be argued that another effect of Even Start was to motivate the fathers to help their children succeed in a learning activity that was difficult for them. Both of these fathers had been in special education programs and had problems with reading in school. Their aspirations for their children were for them to succeed in reading and surpass them in education. The fathers in this study appreciated their family’s par-

ticipation in the program and recognized its benefit for their children and wives.

The father with the lowest reading ability became a direct program recipient of adult education to increase his reading. He began a serious effort to increase his own reading skills, which was not easy for him. The other father expressed a future interest in more schooling to increase his job potential.

The study also revealed uncertainties that these fathers had about their role in their children’s literacy learning. They both deferred to their wives on the major responsibility of reading to the children. This was because of their role definition of a wife as the primary teacher and caregiver and also because of their low reading achievement in school. Men may still be working through their role definitions in regard to early literacy activities. This was indicated in a study by Ortiz and Stile (1996) who reported that even fathers who are involved in literacy activities are unsure of where to begin with their children.

The findings about these Appalachian families are consistent with other studies of inner city and minority families that have debunked the negative stereotypes of low-income families and child literacy learning (Baumann & Thomas, 1997; McClain, 2000; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Many parents with low literacy skills value the use of books with their children. They may only need affirmation that their efforts are of value to their children’s learning.

A major implication of this study is that early childhood teachers should not exclude or underestimate fathers. Even though some fathers may have little direct school or program involvement, they still may have an interest in their child’s learning. Therefore, efforts should be made to communicate directly and indirectly with fathers. Written communications and invitations should be addressed to the child’s mother and father. Even if the father does not live in the child’s home, regular father-child contact can indicate a commitment to the child’s future by the father. As in this study, father contact may be initiated through the mothers. Because many mothers are the “gatekeepers,” they can be encouraged to facilitate closer father involvement with program staff and also encourage father-child literacy activities.

Low father participation may also indicate a reticence to reveal low literacy abilities. The

fathers in this study were fully aware of their lack of achievement and low reading abilities. Direct school involvement and teacher contact may spark painful memories that fathers wish to avoid. Teachers would be wise to increase father interest with books that have traditional male themes. There should be careful selection of materials with text that matches fathers' reading abilities. Fathers' reading preferences should always be considered when providing literacy materials and activity suggestions. A wide range of book choices can be offered.

Fathers' interests, attitudes, and points of view should be considered in program planning. Goldenberg, Reese, and Gallimore (1992) argued that it may be more effective to encourage home involvement that is consistent with parents' existing beliefs than to try to change parents' views. The fathers in this study exhibited positive views toward their children's literacy, but they needed specific information about children's emergent literacy and also affirmation of their own efforts to help their children. They gained more assurance of their own efficacy as they tried ways to use books and other literacy activities prompted by the materials from Even Start. They often read to their children when their wives were absent or busy. The positive reaction from their children seemed to reinforce their efforts.

Fagan (1996) contended that in order for early childhood programs to involve men more, male staff and volunteers are required. This may also be true of father-child literacy activities. Some hesitant fathers and those who have been raised with stereotypic male/female roles may be more receptive to information delivered by other males and fathers than by females. If no male staff are available, then perhaps recruitment of a father volunteer to coordinate father activities would work.

Other considerations include program time scheduled around fathers' work hours and communication addressed specifically to fathers. Invitations to activities geared around fathers' interests may increase involvement. Fathers may wish to meet as a group to discuss their interests and questions regarding child literacy. Fathers should be involved in decision making.

The most important message for early childhood educators from this study is that, with a little encouragement and literacy materials, fathers

will participate in literacy activities with their children. One more adult in the family reading to a child should strengthen the commitment to reading and lifelong literacy activities.

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