



February 2026

Informing Culturally Responsive Training for Home Visitors: Supporting Father Engagement

Acknowledgements

This work was part of the Early Learning Nation (ELN) Collective, which seeks to harness the power of communities to help children — from prenatal to age 8 — grow and thrive. A special thank you to Amanda Quiroz-Guajardo, who conducted the study.

Executive Summary

UnidosUS conducted a multiple-methods study to better understand how father engagement occurs within early childhood home visiting programs and what resources home visitors need to successfully involve fathers in their children's development. The study combined a national survey of over 100 respondents and 21 interviews with trained home visitors from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, across seven states. This work builds on the framework used in the UnidosUS dual language learners published report. Together, the data offers an up-to-date, field-level perspective on emerging fatherhood norms, workforce needs and opportunities to strengthen family-centered home visiting practices.

Home visitors bring substantial experience in early childhood development, but most receive little to no formal preparation explicitly focused on engaging fathers. As a result, they often rely on self-developed strategies, peer support and real-time problem-solving to include fathers in visits. Despite this gap, home visitors report that fathers — particularly those from Latino backgrounds — demonstrate strong curiosity, affection and commitment when they are directly invited to participate.

The findings highlight several factors that shape Latino father engagement: Cultural expectations and gender norms influence how fathers see their role, with many describing themselves as “providers” rather than “caregivers”; home visitors observe a clear shift toward more hands-on, emotionally present fatherhood, especially among younger generations; fathers frequently express a desire to parent differently than they were raised and to build stronger emotional connections with their children.

Structural barriers — such as long work hours, multiple jobs and inconsistent schedules — often limit some fathers' ability to attend home visits. Home visitors caution against interpreting these constraints as a lack of interest. In fact, when the opportunity arises, many fathers show strong engagement during brief interactions and ask specific questions about child development, milestones or parenting strategies. -

The findings suggest that effective father engagement for Latinos requires intentional outreach, culturally responsive communication, flexible scheduling and clear guidance on how fathers can meaningfully participate. Home visitors consistently expressed interest in additional training, tools and resources designed to strengthen their ability to engage fathers in ways that respect family dynamics, cultural norms and individual comfort levels.

This report presents key insights from the study, identifies promising practices already in use in the field and outlines actionable recommendations to strengthen father engagement across home visiting programs. Enhancing the workforce's capacity to partner with both mothers and fathers has the potential to deepen family relationships, support children's development and advance equitable outcomes for diverse communities.

Introduction

Father engagement in early childhood is not simply a supplemental strategy — it is a core component of children's healthy development, family stability and community well-being. [Research](#) shows that [fathers' engagement](#) in early caregiving and shared activities is associated with positive cognitive, language and social-emotional development in children — above and beyond mothers' contributions — suggesting that

father involvement supports broader developmental outcomes. [Studies](#) also find that when fathers contribute rich verbal input during play and everyday interactions, children demonstrate greater vocabulary growth and language skills, highlighting the unique role of father language input in early literacy development.

Within Latino families, [father engagement](#) reflects culturally rooted values such as familismo (strong family bonds), respeto (mutual respect) and a deep commitment to providing for the household. At the same time, Latino fathers often navigate evolving expectations about caregiving, emotional expression and shared parenting roles. These cultural strengths — including bilingualism, storytelling traditions and intergenerational support — offer powerful opportunities for home visiting programs to engage fathers as partners in early learning.

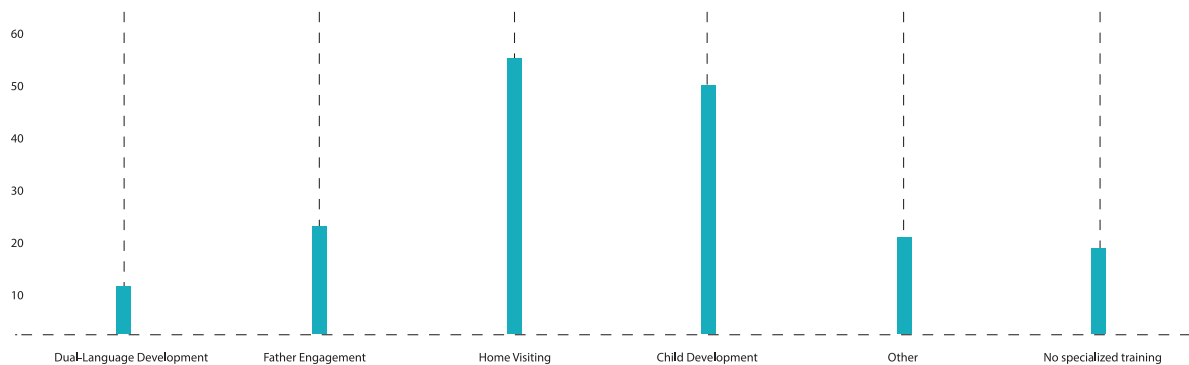
Yet, early childhood systems often default to viewing mothers as primary caregivers, unintentionally sidelining fathers and limiting the full potential of home visiting services. A culturally responsive approach that recognizes fathers as essential caregivers can help programs become more inclusive, equitable and effective.

Study Approach		
<p>Data Sources</p> <p>This report is based on a mixed-methods study conducted by UnidosUS to understand current practices and challenges related to father engagement in early childhood home visiting programs.</p>	<p>In-Depth Interviews</p> <p>Participants: 21 trained home visitors. Interviews conducted in English or Spanish, per interviewee’s preference.</p> <p>Focus Areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences with father engagement. • Cultural and structural factors affecting participation. • Strategies used to include fathers. • Training needs and workforce challenges. 	<p>Analytic Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. • Identification of cross-cutting themes with an emphasis on culturally specific insights from Latino and multicultural families.
<p>Survey of Home Visitors</p> <p><i>* Respondents: 111 trained home visitors</i></p> <p><i>* Gender: 94% identify as women</i></p> <p><i>* Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino (60%), White (22%), Black or African American (11%), Asian or Pacific Islander (2%), Native American or Alaska Native (1%)</i></p> <p><i>* Languages: Mostly bilingual (65%)</i></p> <p><i>* Education: Many hold postsecondary degrees (37% bachelor’s degree, 23% master’s degree), but only 39% in early childhood education</i></p> <p><i>* Years of experience: Many 3 years or less (35%) or more than 10 years (24%)</i></p> <p><i>* Caseloads: Average of 17 families per home visitor at a time</i></p> <p><i>* Age range of children served: Prenatal to age 6</i></p> <p><i>* Duration of each visit: Mostly 45-60 minutes (42%)</i></p> <p><i>* Program Models Represented: Parents as Teachers, Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership and others</i></p>		

Home Visitors' Knowledge and Perspectives on Father Engagement

Home visitors bring deep knowledge of child development and family dynamics, yet their understanding of father engagement is shaped largely by lived experience rather than formal training. Most home visitors interviewed had not received any kind of specialized training in father engagement (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Types of Specialized Training Providers Have Received
(Data Source: Survey of Home Visitors, 2024)



Note: The numbers represent a head count of home visitors who have received specialized training. Some home visitors have received specialized training in multiple areas.

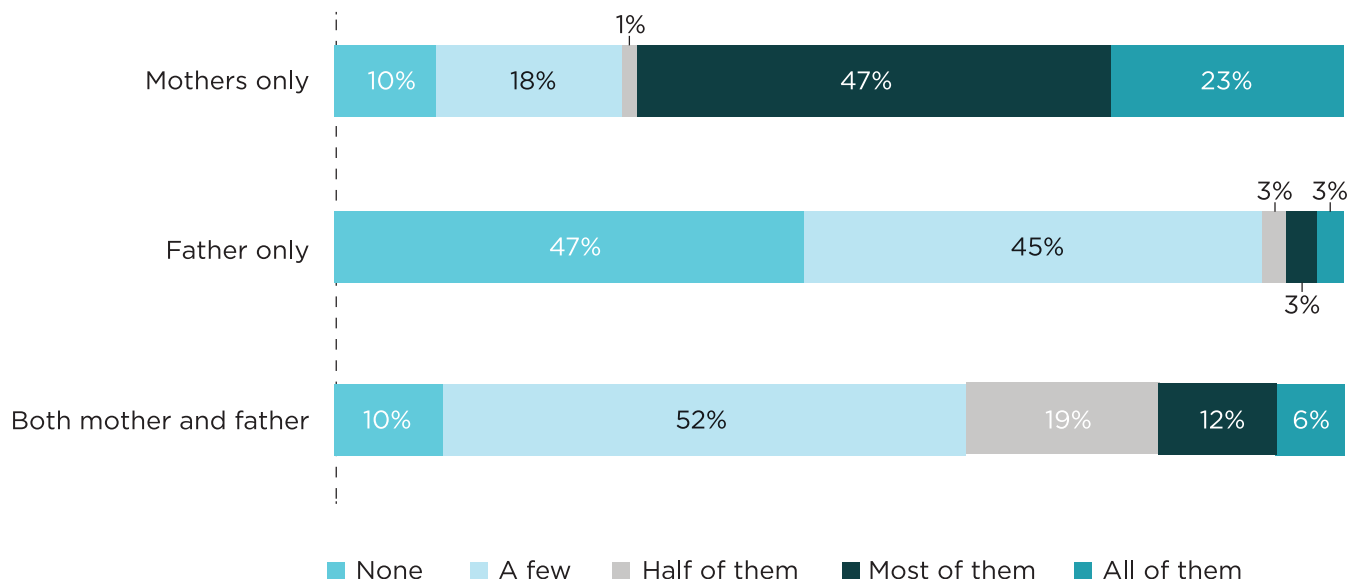
Home visitors also reported experience across multiple program models: Parents as Teachers, Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership and others. With an average caseload of 17 families at a given time, they possess extensive on-the-ground knowledge of how caregiving unfolds across diverse households and cultural contexts.

Training and Preparation for Father Engagement

Survey findings show that specialized preparation in father engagement is rare, with most respondents reporting training primarily in child development, parent-child interaction or general home visiting practices.

This lack of targeted preparation means home visitors often learn to engage fathers through informal means – trial and error, intuition, peer advice and real-time relationship building. Many described feeling confident in their ability to connect with mothers, yet less sure about how to approach fathers, especially when cultural norms or family dynamics complicate the interaction (Figure 2). Interviewees consistently expressed a desire for more precise guidance, evidence-based strategies and culturally informed tools to support father participation in ways that feel respectful and safe for all caregivers.

Figure 2. Caregivers Involved in a Home Visit
(Data Source: Survey of Home Visitors, 2024)



Note: The percentage of home visitors who reported how often a home visiting session involved just a mother, just a father or both parents.

Themes Derived From the Surveys and Interviews

Qualitative data from surveys and interviews¹ illuminated several themes that shape home visitors' perspectives on father engagement:

1. Gendered Expectations Influence Engagement

Many home visitors noted that fathers, particularly in Latino families, often view themselves primarily as providers, not caregivers. Mothers sometimes describe their partners using terms like machista, reflecting traditional gender roles that place Latino fathers outside the caregiving sphere. Home visitors emphasized that these expectations often reflect socialization rather than a lack of interest. Below is an instance shared by a home visitor in which a father thought he could not attend a learning session because men were not allowed:

[The mother said:] What happened is that, you know, I told my husband to come get the child, and he told me no, because men aren't allowed to come in here, because this place is for women. And I said...No, no, no, no, no...we need to talk about that....This place is made for everyone.²

Additionally, one home visitor reflects on how Latino culture might be a barrier to father engagement:

I think that with fathers, sometimes the difficulty can be time, but I feel that it's not really about time as much as it is about culture that we sometimes carry with us... and I don't want to generalize, but as Latinos, sometimes still the machismo passed down from our grandparents and our parents, still affects some fathers who say, 'No, that's not for men.'³

¹ All interviews within this report are used with the permission of the interviewees. Names are withheld to protect the privacy of the home visitors interviewed.

² Originally communicated in Spanish: “[La madre dijo:] Lo que pasa es que sabes que le dije a mi esposo que viniera por el niño y me dijo que no, porque aquí no pueden entrar los hombres, que porque este lugar es para mujeres. Y yo dije No, no, no, no, no... tenemos que hablar de eso... Porque no. Este lugar está hecho para todo el mundo.

³ Originally communicated in Spanish: Entonces yo creo que con los papás a veces la dificultad puede ser el tiempo, pero siento que no es tanto el tiempo, es más la cultura que a veces traemos (...) y no quiero generalizar, pero como latinos a veces todavía el machismo de nuestros abuelos, de nuestros papás, todavía afecta a algunos papás que dicen ‘No, eso no es de hombres’.

2. Latino Fathers Demonstrate Strong Care and Curiosity When Included

Despite initial hesitations, home visitors frequently described fathers as deeply affectionate, attentive and eager to learn once they felt welcomed during the visit. Many fathers expressed emotional reactions — such as pride, surprise and joy — when observing a child’s developmental progress. Some shared a desire to parent differently than how they were raised, highlighting generational shifts in fatherhood norms. For example, one home visitor described how some fathers feel embarrassed when participating in group engagement activities, but she is hopeful that they take the knowledge home with them, where they do not have to feel shame:

[Fathers] start to enjoy it once they see how it works, once they realize they are in a safe space and that they can feel confident participating and asking questions with other dads. Yes, there are still some fathers who feel embarrassed about singing with their children in front of everyone, but we, as teachers, model it for them as if the children were our own.⁴

3. Latino Fathers Often Express a Lack Confidence in Their Caregiving Skills

Several home visitors described moments when fathers expressed uncertainty about their role, saying things like, “I don’t know what to do” or “I feel useless” with a newborn. These insights underscore the importance of affirming fathers’ strengths and offering clear guidance on how they can participate in childrearing.

4. Structural Barriers are Often Misinterpreted as Disinterest

[Studies](#) indicate that many Latino fathers work long hours and outside the standard Monday-Friday schedule, with roughly half reporting non-daytime work and a significant share working more than 40 hours per week. This highlights the notion that employment in jobs with limited flexibility and extended work commitments can significantly affect family time. Home visitors stressed that these realities, not apathy, often keep fathers from joining visits. Many described fathers who returned home exhausted yet still showed affection or attempted brief engagement with their children.

Together, these perspectives reveal a home visiting workforce deeply committed to supporting families but underprepared to engage fathers in systematic, culturally responsive ways. The insights that follow illuminate what makes father engagement successful, the barriers home visitors encounter and the types of training and resources they believe would strengthen their practice. For example, here the home visitor describes how initially a father would not be able to come to a program graduation event for his child because of work, but the home visitors made arrangements to accommodate the father on his lunch break:

So, the father arrived, and we had everything prepared. And when he got there, the first thing was for him to eat, because he was on his lunch break. We brought snacks and food for the fathers. So as soon as he arrived, we told him, ‘Eat with your child.’ And while he was eating, we made a few announcements. When he finished eating, we announced him so he could come up to receive his certificate. He came up very happy with his child and received his certificate. And what really stayed with me was that he thanked us. He told us, ‘Thank you so much for everything you’ve done. I feel very happy for all the love you give my child.’⁵

Benefits of Father Engagement

Home visitors widely affirmed that father involvement strengthens children’s development, family relations and the connection to one’s identity and community:

⁴ Originally communicated in Spanish: *[(los padres)] ya empiezan a disfrutar, ya después de que ven cómo funciona, de que están en un lugar seguro, de que pueden tener la confianza de participar y de preguntar con otros papás. Sí, todavía tenemos papás que les da pena cantar con sus niños en frente de todos, pero nosotras las maestras lo modelamos como si pues fueran nuestros niños.*

⁵ Originally communicated in Spanish: *Entonces llegó el papá y preparamos todo. Y cuando llegue, primero que coma porque está en su almuerzo. Y trajimos snacks y comida para dar para los papás. Entonces, en cuanto llegó dijimos coma con su niño. Y ahorita, mientras usted está comiendo, vamos a hacer unos anuncios. Y en cuanto usted termine de comer lo vamos a anunciar para que pase por su certificado. Y él pasó muy feliz con su niño recibió su certificado y luego lo que me marcó fue que nos que nos agradeció, nos dijo muchas gracias por todo lo que han hecho. Me siento muy contento por todo el amor que le dan a mi hijo*

Father Engagement Enhances Child Development

Fathers offer children unique interactions that promote problem-solving, independence and confidence. When fathers participate in play, reading or hands-on activities, children often show increased motivation and joy.

Home visitors described moments when fathers took an active role for the first time, such as helping a child build a structure, explore materials or complete an activity. These moments often catalyze sustained engagement. As one home visitor noted, “The more involved the father is from the beginning when [the children] are babies, the better their relationship will be in the future.”

Emotional Bonds and Stability

Many home visitors described father engagement as contributing significantly to family stability. When fathers participate in home visits, mothers often appear more supported and children show greater emotional security. As one home visitor shared, “I think it almost empowers the family as a whole when the dad sits in on one visit.”

Several home visitors emphasized the importance of preparing fathers for caregiving responsibilities in cases of emergency, illness or unexpected family loss. These conversations help fathers understand their essential role beyond being financial providers.

Cultural Identity and Community Connection

For Latino fathers, engagement often reinforces cultural traditions, storytelling, bilingual development and shared family values. Fathers bring cultural knowledge that enriches children’s learning and strengthens identity. One home visitor described how children took pride in seeing their fathers participate in a cultural activity: “The kids looked at their parents with pride, talking about their culture right in front of us. It was really beautiful.”

Challenges in Promoting Father Engagement

Home visitors consistently report that promoting father engagement requires navigating a complex set of challenges related to work schedules, cultural norms, family dynamics and program design:

Structural Barriers

Many Latino fathers work long hours, some working six days a week, according to the home visitors participating in the interviews. This severely limits their availability during typical visit times. Even when fathers want to engage, fatigue or scheduling conflicts make participation difficult.

“The biggest obstacle is work,” one home visitor remarked, explaining that many fathers are the primary providers for their families and are often unavailable during home visit times. Another shared, “Maybe because of the visits, the schedules...we go during the hours when parents, mainly dads, are working.”

This observation was echoed by other home visitors, who pointed out that many programs operate during traditional work hours, making it difficult for fathers to participate. One home visitor expressed the need for change: “We’re discussing this with the supervisor and director to see how we can involve our fathers. Evening meetings, around five or six, work quite well.”

Cultural Barriers and Gender Norms

Several home visitors reported mothers describing their partners as following a more traditional, machista parenting style. These fathers may have been taught that caregiving is a maternal responsibility or may have never witnessed affectionate fathering in their own childhoods. Some fathers feel uncomfortable participating in a space they perceive as designed for mothers. Others may feel intimidated by the home visitor or worry about being judged. As one home visitor noted, “Many Latino fathers don’t get involved in early learning because they have not been formally educated themselves.”

Relational Barriers

Home visitors often observe fathers stepping into another room during visits, declining to participate directly, or remaining nearby as quiet observers. These behaviors do not necessarily reflect disinterest, but may signal discomfort, uncertainty about their role or differences in communication styles. Research suggests that men and women often engage differently, with women more likely to emphasize verbal and emotional connection and men more likely to engage through action, problem-solving or task-based interaction. As a result, home visiting approaches that rely primarily on conversation may unintentionally feel less inviting to some fathers.

Home visitors must also navigate a delicate balance when inviting fathers into visits. They aim to encourage participation without applying pressure or making mothers feel displaced in a space traditionally centered around them. Doing so requires cultural awareness, sensitivity to family dynamics and strong relationship-building skills, as well as flexibility in how engagement is framed and facilitated.

Complex Family Structures

Latino immediate families often include stepfathers, uncles, cousins or multiple adults in the home. Home visitors must navigate these dynamics, respectfully. One home visitor described accidentally referring to a stepfather as “dad,” which led her to adopt new practices for confirming family roles while still encouraging male caregiver involvement.

Trauma, Vulnerability and Immigrant Stressors

Narratives from the interviews included stories of Latino families, and fathers in particular, experiencing severe hardship. Home visitors often provide support for job searching, financial literacy, transportation and immigration-related stress. These harsh realities can impact a father’s availability and emotional readiness.

Current Practices for Engaging Fathers

Despite barriers, home visitors employ numerous effective strategies:

Flexible, Family-Centered Scheduling

Many home visitors intentionally schedule visits when fathers are likely to be home. Others adjust schedules seasonally based on family work patterns. Home visitors emphasized the importance of not centering visits exclusively around mothers’ schedules.

Culturally Relevant Invitations

Successful strategies include: improving communication to facilitate engagement using strategies like personalized text and WhatsApp reminders; direct yet respectful invitations, acknowledging fathers’ work commitments and framing father involvement as beneficial to the entire family.

Activity-Based Engagement

Hands-on activities help fathers overcome discomfort. Examples include:

- Bowling games
- Building projects using boxes
- Outdoor or movement activities
- Nutrition conversations and home gardening
- Soccer or interest-based play

Activities provide natural entry points for fathers who feel insecure about reading, singing or formal learning tasks.

Universal Materials for Mothers and Fathers

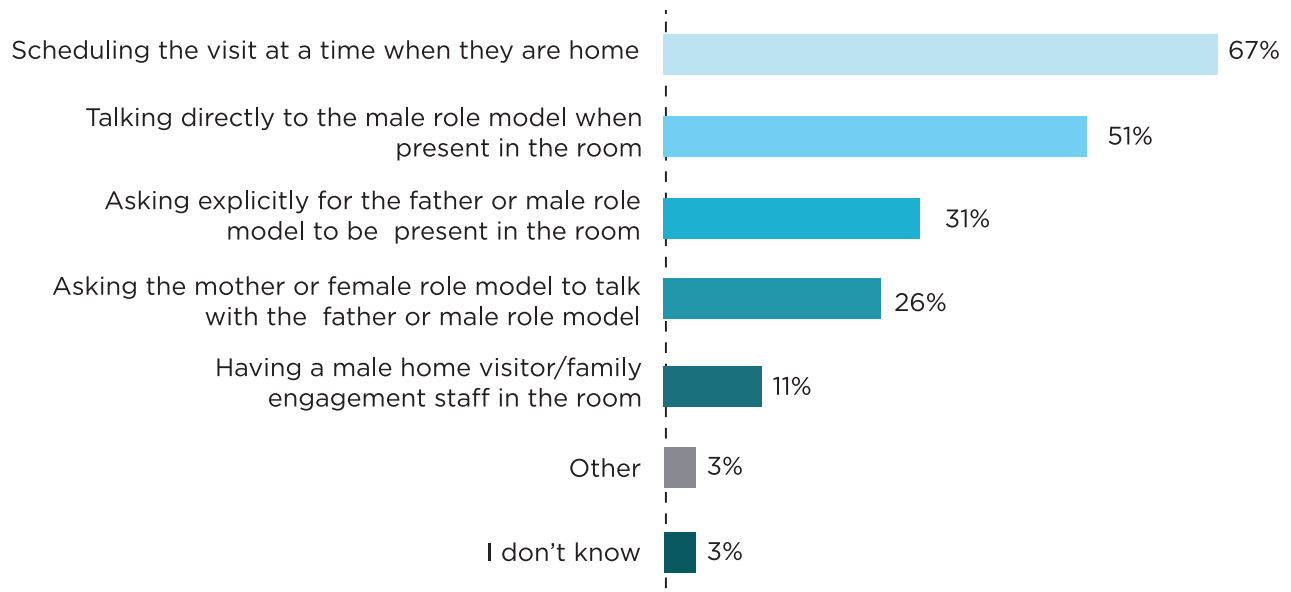
Home visitors avoid tailoring materials only to mothers. Instead, they provide family-wide activities, bilingual handouts and shared play resources.

Affirming and Celebrating Participation

Fathers respond positively to praise, acknowledgment and visible recognition. Celebrations, certificates and family events help reinforce their importance. Several home visitors noted that fathers respond well when their effort as providers is validated. As noted by one home visitor:

It's very important to validate the presence of the father. I always validate a dad's participation because normally they're always working. But still, I validate their work and the enormous effort they make to provide [for their families]. And I always let them know: It's important that you do this for your family, for your wife, for your children. But it's also important for you to participate in the school's events... We celebrate when a dad is there, and they feel very important at the next event.

In your experience, what of the below works better to engage fathers and/or male role models during your home visits?



Training Needs Identified by Home Visitors

Home visitors consistently expressed a desire for more structured training on:

- How to approach fathers without triggering defensiveness.
- How to address machismo or cultural norms, respectfully.
- How to balance invitations to fathers while still centering mothers' comfort.
- How to use hands-on activities to draw fathers into the visit.
- How to navigate blended families and complex household dynamics.
- How to facilitate emotional bonding between fathers and children.
- How to support fathers who feel unsure of their role.
- How to differentiate absence from disengagement.

Home visitors also requested in-person, experiential learning opportunities where they can share strategies, observe demonstrations and learn from peers. They expressed fatigue with online-only modules and noted that real-life examples and emotional storytelling help them grow professionally.

Implications for Home Visiting Practice

The findings make clear that father engagement is not a peripheral activity, but a core practice that requires intentional design within home visiting programs. Across interviews and survey responses, home visitors consistently reported that fathers show interest, care and motivation when they are directly invited and given clear ways to participate. This suggests that increasing father engagement is less about changing fathers' attitudes and more about changing how home visitor programs structure visits, frame participation and equip staff to engage men as caregivers from the outset.

At the same time, current approaches often fall short because home visiting systems remain largely mother-centered. Home visitors are rarely trained to engage fathers, and programs frequently rely on standard scheduling, materials and engagement strategies that unintentionally exclude men with long or irregular work hours. Absence is often misread as disengagement. Shifting practice will require flexible scheduling, activity-based engagement strategies that lower intimidation and culturally responsive professional development that helps home visitors confidently invite fathers, all while respecting unique family dynamics. Embedding these changes at the program level can move father engagement from an individual effort to a consistent, field-wide practice.

Recommendations for Strengthening Father Engagement

Grounded in practitioner insights and research evidence, these recommendations outline practical steps home visiting programs can take to make father engagement more intentional, accessible and sustained:

1. Develop Structured Father Engagement Training for Home Visitors

Training should include culturally responsive approaches, scripts for inclusive invitations and strategies for navigating machismo or discomfort without judgment.

2. Expand Flexible Scheduling Options

Programs should institutionalize options for evening or weekend visits and consider once-a-month special events to account for the father's availability and increase participation.

3. Create Father-Friendly Materials and Activities

Explore fathers' interests and provide ready-to-use activities more closely aligned with their reported interests.

4. Incorporate Strengths-Based Framing

Train home visitors to validate the father's traditional role as provider, while inviting them into shared learning and caregiving.

5. Build Community Partnerships with Fatherhood Programs

Partner with community agencies that specialize in father engagement to cohost events, workshops and support groups.

6. Celebrate and Normalize Father Participation

Certificates, public acknowledgments and social media representation, with permission, can reinforce positive engagement.

7. Address Complex Family Structures

Training should prepare home visitors to sensitively navigate stepfathers, other male role models, extended kin and non-traditional household dynamics.

8. Provide Emotional Support Strategies

Help home visitors learn how to support fathers who feel insecure, intimidated or inexperienced.

Conclusion

Father engagement is a crucial component of child development and overall family well-being. Findings from surveys and interviews with trained home visitors reveal a complex but hopeful landscape. Fathers want to be involved and children benefit when they are involved. Home visitors play a pivotal role in making that involvement possible by creating welcoming, respectful entry points for fathers within home visiting services.

By investing in targeted, culturally responsive professional development and equipping home visitors with practical tools and strategies, programs can ensure that fathers are not treated as guests in their children's developmental journeys, but as valued and capable partners. As one home visitor shared: "When fathers are meaningfully included, "the emotional bonds form and the motivation to be together begins."

Next steps for this work include piloting Latino father engagement professional development for our Affiliates, informed directly by home visitors' experiences; testing hands-on and scenario-based training models; and refining materials based on feedback from the field. Over time, these trainings can be scaled across programs and regions to support consistent, strengths-based approaches to engaging fathers from diverse cultural and family contexts.

UnidosUS will use these findings to codesign training resources with home visitors, inform technical assistance efforts and strengthen advocacy for family-centered home visiting policies that recognize fathers as essential caregivers. This research will also guide future partnerships, curriculum development and resource creation aimed at improving outcomes for children and families.

As one home visitor shared: "[Dads] make all the difference, you know, even just being present, I think it makes children feel happier and maybe more confident in trying new things."

Strengthening father engagement strengthens families. Strengthening families strengthens communities.



UNIDOSUS | EDUCATION