

6-1-2007

Reaching Fathers in Parent Education: Perceptions of Newsletter Value Among Fathers and Father Figures

Sean E. Brotherson

North Dakota State University, sean.brotherson@ndsuext.nodak.edu

Christopher J. Bouwhuis

chrisbmft@yahoo.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Brotherson, S. E., & Bouwhuis, C. J. (2007). Reaching Fathers in Parent Education: Perceptions of Newsletter Value Among Fathers and Father Figures. *The Journal of Extension*, 45(3), Article 4. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol45/iss3/4>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



June 2007 // Volume 45 // Number 3 // Feature Articles // 3FEA3



PREVIOUS ARTICLE



ISSUE CONTENTS



NEXT ARTICLE



Reaching Fathers in Parent Education: Perceptions of Newsletter Value Among Fathers and Father Figures

Abstract

Does parent education pay attention to fathers and their perceptions of educational resources? Not often enough. The NDSU Extension Service developed a parenting newsletter for fathers of young children--Father Times. Findings focused on how fathers of children in kindergarten perceive and value the newsletter as a resource. Results showed that fathers: (1) appreciated the layout, readability, and usefulness of the newsletter; (2) valued the newsletter more highly than other formal sources of information; and (3) indicated the features and topics most valuable to them. A newsletter for fathers can be a unique resource for reaching fathers in parent education.

Sean E. Brotherson

Extension Family Science Specialist
North Dakota State University
Fargo, North Dakota
sean.brotherson@ndsuext.nodak.edu

Christopher J. Bouwhuis

Certified Family Life Educator
Layton, Utah
chrisbmft@yahoo.com

Introduction and Background

Parents need information and knowledge that will help them to understand children, provide a healthy environment, and nurture their children to adulthood. One educational tool that has become increasingly popular in parent education is the use of parenting newsletters (Martin & Weigel, 2001; Walker, 2005.). These educational resources are often targeted at parents of children of particular ages and focus on increasing a parent's knowledge, giving parents confidence, and promoting healthy parenting practices (Riley, Meinhardt, Nelson, Salisbury, & Winnett, 1991).

Although parenting newsletters have been developed and used in parent education for many years, they have rarely if ever focused specifically on fathers as parents and their role in the development of young children. A growing body of research has documented the changing roles of fathers and their importance to the well-being of young children (e.g., Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). In particular, it has been noted that parent and family educators seeking to develop best practices need to "adapt content, methods, and goals to include male needs and parenting strengths" (Palm, 1997, p. 176). Fathers and father figures of young children may benefit from information targeted specifically at them as parents. To address the needs of fathers and father figures as a growing audience in parent education, the *Father Times* parenting newsletter was developed within the NDSU Extension Service at North Dakota State University.

The *Father Times* Parenting Newsletter

Father Times is an educational newsletter series designed to provide fathers and father figures of young children (ages 0 to 8) with quality information and ideas about healthy parenting and child development. It is also appropriate for mothers or other caregivers of young children. The newsletter resource includes a variety of features designed to teach, share examples, encourage

discussion, and provide activities that fathers or father figures and children can do together. *Father Times* is a series of nine topic-based newsletters on issues such as child guidance, reading, and play with children, and is available in two versions, an in-depth eight-page version and a shorter four-page version, in both English and Spanish.

The *Father Times* newsletter was developed after conducting a literature review on parenting newsletters and identifying a need for reaching fathers. The state family life specialist in North Dakota and a local parent educator with previous Extension experience worked together to create the materials. Newsletter topics and features were selected to focus on increasing practical knowledge of child development, assisting parents to aid in healthy development, and facilitating active father-child involvement. Also, the generative fathering framework was used to guide emphasis on key areas of father-child relationships (Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998). The materials were then reviewed in depth by two child development professionals, three mothers, and three fathers, and pilot tested with parents in Head Start and Early Childhood Family Education. Suggested revisions were then incorporated into the final materials.

Since its inception in 2003, the *Father Times* newsletter has been evaluated specifically with fathers of kindergarten and Head Start populations and is now being used in over 25 states throughout the United States. It is designed for use in a variety of educational settings, and has been used in early childhood settings (Head Start and Early Head Start), kindergarten and other school programs, parent education centers, home visitation programs, prisons with incarcerated fathers, social service agencies, county Extension programs, and other areas where fathers and father figures can be reached. Local programs or agencies order the newsletter series, instructional guide, and evaluation materials on CD and then print and distribute the material locally. Information about *Father Times* is available on-line for the public and other professionals to access at <<http://www.ext.nodak.edu/parenting/fathertimes.htm>>.

Purposes of the Study

Only a handful of studies have evaluated parenting newsletters. Those studies that have been completed suggest that newsletters can be an effective means for strengthening parent-child relationships (Cudaback et al., 1985; Garton et al., 2003; Riley et al., 1991). Logically, those parents who read more of a newsletter and who value it more highly as an information source report greater impacts from a parenting newsletter (Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997; Walker, 2005). For those involved in community education, a critical question is how individuals perceive and value written educational materials. Written material not perceived as valuable by parents is less likely to be read, discussed, or used in guiding parental activities and behavior.

The major purpose of the study reported here was to assess how fathers and father figures would perceive the value of a parenting newsletter as a resource for parenting information. This question was addressed in multiple ways. Fathers were asked to rate:

- Overall appeal and usefulness of the newsletter;
- Value compared to other sources of information on parenting and family life;
- Value of various features of the newsletter; and
- Value of specific issues of the newsletter.

This approach allowed us to assess for the first time how fathers perceive a parenting newsletter as a source of information and also to gain insight into their perceptions of a newsletter's value using multiple criteria.

Methodology and Sample

Six complete issues of the *Father Times* newsletter (8-page version) were distributed to parents of children at an urban kindergarten center on a weekly basis. Newsletter issues covering the topics of communication, connection, play, reading, emotional intelligence, and child guidance were selected for this project. A self-report questionnaire was used as the research instrument, which was developed for this project following a review of prior research on parenting newsletters. The study used a census approach and sampled the entire population of fathers of children in the kindergarten program. Each father or father figure with a child in the kindergarten program was sent a cover letter, questionnaire, and return envelope, and an incentive for return of the survey was a gift certificate for a free donut with their child at a local restaurant. The questionnaire could be returned by regular mail, to the child's teacher, or at a parent involvement activity at the school.

Of the 434 questionnaires distributed, a total of 177 were returned with useable data (41% response rate). Only fathers and father figures were included in the study. The mean age for fathers in the study was 37.16 years ($SD=6.02$ years). The average number of children these fathers and father figures reported having was 2.40 children ($SD=.99$). The majority of respondents (95.9%) reported themselves as Caucasian, followed by African-Americans and Hispanics (2.4% of the total sample population). The majority of respondents (83.6%) reported being currently married, followed by separated or divorced (7%), single and never married (3.5%),

and living with a partner or being remarried (each 2.9%). Fifty-six percent of participants reported having a 4-year degree or higher, followed by "some college" (17.6%), a 2-year degree (13.5%), and high school/GED (12.4%). The majority of the participants (89.8%) reported being the biological father of the child, 5.9% reported being the child's stepfather, and 4.7% of the participants reported being some other type of father figure to the child.

Results

The main research question for the study focused on the perceived value of the parenting newsletter by fathers and father figures. Overall perceived value of the newsletter was assessed with five questions using a 4-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Relative value of the newsletter as an information resource as compared to other sources of information was assessed with nine questions using a 5-point Likert scale. The perceived value of specific newsletter features was assessed with five questions using a 5-point Likert scale. Finally, the perceived value of specific issues (topics) in the newsletter series was evaluated for six newsletters using a 5-point Likert scale. An open-ended question to assess perception of newsletter value was also included to allow for participant feedback.

Fathers' Responses to Newsletter Appeal

Participants were first asked how they perceived the overall appeal and value of the *Father Times* newsletter. Questions focused on newsletter length and format appeal and also if it was easy to read and understand, interesting and informative, and useful to everyday parenting. These questions capture responses to newsletter layout, readability, and usefulness for parenting.

Most fathers (89.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that the newsletter was about the right length, and 89.9% felt the newsletter was visually appealing in its format. Most of them also seemed to like the readability of the newsletter, with 97.5% agreeing the newsletter was easy to read and understand and 92.3% of participants agreeing it was interesting to read and informative. Finally, the majority of participants (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that the newsletter was useful in their everyday parenting (Table 1). These results suggest a positive response by fathers in their perceptions of general appeal of the *Father Times* newsletter as a resource.

Table 1.
Fathers' Ratings of Newsletter Appeal

For me, the <i>Father Times</i> newsletter was:	Percent Reporting Agreement
About the right length	89.2%
Visually appealing in its format	89.9%
Easy to read and understand	97.5%
Interesting to read and informative	92.3%
Useful in my everyday parenting	89%

Perceptions of Newsletter Value Compared to Other Information Sources

Study participants were asked to rate the usefulness of nine different sources from which men might get information on parenting and family life. This provides a sense of how parents might value information as compared to other information sources. Each information source was rated from "not at all useful" (1) to "very useful" (5). Sources of information included (1) parents, relatives, and in-laws; (2) spouse or mother of the child; (3) friends or other parents; (4) other fathers or father figures; (5) physician, nurse, or care provider; (6) books, magazines, and newspapers; (7) parent education or discussion group; (8) the Internet; and (9) the *Father Times* newsletter.

Among the sources of information rated by participants, all informal sources of information (such as relatives or friends) received the highest rankings. Of these sources, the information source rated most highly was the father's spouse or mother of their child, with 78.7% of men rating her as "useful" or "very useful." Parents, relatives, and in-laws were rated the next highest as a source of information (54.5% rated as "useful" or "very useful"), followed by friends or other parents, and other fathers or father figures.

The *Father Times* newsletter rated highest among all formal sources of information, with 73.8% of men listing it as "somewhat" to "very" useful. Six out of 10 fathers rated physician, nurse, or care provider (59.5%) and books, magazines, or newspapers (62.8%) as "somewhat useful" or higher. The sources of information regarded as least useful by fathers in this study were parent education or discussion groups and the Internet. Mean scores for fathers' ratings of the usefulness of different information sources to them are listed in Table 2.

Table 2.
Usefulness of Information Sources on Parenting and Family Life

Sources of Information - Informal	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Spouse or Mother of Your Child	4.25	.94
Your Parents, Relatives, and In-Laws	3.64	1.01
Friends or Other Parents	3.33	.84
Other Fathers or Father Figures	3.26	.89
Sources of Information - Formal		
<i>Father Times</i> Newsletter	3.08	.82
Physician, Nurse, or Care Provider	2.97	1.11
Books, Magazines, and Newspapers	2.85	.95
Parent Education or Discussion Group	2.53	1.03
The Internet	2.22	1.04

Fathers' Perceptions of Specific Newsletter Features

Fathers and father figures were next asked to rate the value to them of specific features of the newsletter. The purpose of this effort was to assess which features of the newsletter resource were most highly valued by fathers and father figures. Each issue of the *Father Times* newsletter included five recurring sections that were listed in the questionnaire for fathers to rate. These specific newsletter features were: (1) "Once Upon a Time" (a story about a father and his situation); (2) "Fathering Facts" (research about fathering on a specific topic); (3) "What Children Need" (child development information on a specific topic); (4) "Time Together" (activities for fathers and children); and (5) a list of resources and books for dads and kids. Again, each was rated on a 5-point scale from "not at all useful" (1) to "very useful" (5).

Fathers rated the newsletter feature on child development topics ("What Children Need" as the most useful of the five sections, with 53.9% of them indicating it was "useful" or "very useful" and 30.8% saying it was "somewhat useful." "Time Together," the newsletter section on activities for dads and kids, was rated next highest by participants, with 49.3% suggesting it was "useful" or "very useful" to them. Another 35.2% of the men marked it as "somewhat useful" to them. The "Fathering Facts" section was rated "useful" or "very useful" by 46.4% of the fathers in the study, and 37.9% indicated it was "somewhat useful." These three newsletter features were regarded as somewhat to very useful by three out of four fathers or father figures in the study.

The newsletter features that included a story about a father and his situation ("Once Upon a Time") and a list of resources or books to read for dads and kids were rated "useful" or higher, respectively, by 33.1% and 28.5% of participants, with many more marking them as "somewhat useful." These results give insight into what features of a newsletter are perceived as most useful by fathers and father figures. Mean scores for fathers' ratings of the usefulness of each newsletter feature are listed in Table 3.

Table 3.
Fathers' Ratings of Specific Newsletter Features

Newsletter Feature	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Child Development Information on Specific Topics ("What Children Need")	3.60	.99
Activities for Dads and Kids ("Time Together")	3.49	.95
Research About Fathering and a Topic ("Fathering Facts")	3.41	.87
Story About Dad and His Situation ("Once Upon a Time")	3.21	.88
List of Resources or Books to Read for Dads and Kids	2.98	1.02

Fathers' Perceptions of Specific Newsletter Topics

A final aspect of how fathers perceived the value of the newsletter was assessed by having them rate the usefulness of specific newsletter issues on single topics. Each newsletter issue revolved around a singular topic such as reading with children or play with children, rather than presenting a smorgasbord of age-related information. Fathers' ratings were completed on a 5-point scale ranging from "not at all useful" (1) to "very useful" (5). The newsletter topics assessed were on connection, communication, play, reading, child guidance, and emotional intelligence.

The newsletter topics as rated by fathers did not show dramatic differences, with only a .14 difference between the highest and lowest mean scores. The topic of "fathers, kids, and communication" received the highest rating, with 87.1% of men listing it as "somewhat useful" or

higher and 46.2% as "useful" or "very useful." "Fathers and children's emotional intelligence" was rated next highest, with 47.7% of men marking it as "useful" or "very useful" and 82.5% overall as "somewhat useful" or higher. The topics rated next were reading and child guidance, respectively, with 45.4% and 42.9% of men rating these as "useful" or "very useful." Finally, the newsletter topic of connections with children was rated by 41.6% as "useful" or "very useful," and the topic of play as "useful" or higher by 42.2% of fathers. In all, eight out of 10 fathers rated each newsletter topic as at least "somewhat useful" or higher. Mean scores for fathers' ratings of the usefulness of each newsletter topic are listed in Table 4.

Table 4.
Fathers' Ratings of Specific Newsletter Topics

Newsletter Topic	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Fathers, Kids, and Communication	3.45	.86
Fathers and Children's Emotional Intelligence	3.42	.97
Fathers and the Magic of Reading	3.39	.89
Fathers and Child Guidance	3.36	.94
Fathers, Kids, and Making Connections	3.32	.81
Fathers and the World of Play	3.31	.82

Discussion and Applications

Prior studies indicate that parenting newsletters can be a valuable resource for information on parenting and family life (e.g., Cudaback et al. 1985; Doescher, Pratt, Allen, & Grobe, 1997; Merkowitz, Jelly, Collins, & Arkin, 1997; Riley et al., 1991). However, all such previous studies have focused almost exclusively on mothers as parents. This study suggests that, for fathers and father figures, a parenting newsletter can also be a good resource for parenting information.

It is important to acknowledge that while this study suggests positive perceptions among fathers regarding a newsletter resource, there are also limitations to consider. A significant majority of the sample population was Caucasian, well educated, and currently married, which is not necessarily representative of the broader population. Further research with more broadly representative samples will be necessary to assess these findings, and these findings may not generalize to more diverse populations. Additionally, it is likely that those individuals who felt most positively about the newsletter resource were more likely to complete and return the surveys, and nonrespondents to the survey may vary significantly in their perceptions and be less positive than reported here.

A few larger issues are raised by the findings in this study. One issue is that fathers and father figures have often been neglected in efforts to reach parents with educational resources, and the topic of fathers in family life represents a rich opportunity for further exploration. Key potential topics regarding fathers in family life include the contributions of fathers to children, barriers to meaningful father involvement, important contexts of father involvement, and critical strategies and resources for involving fathers in family life. Other practical questions include what goals mothers versus fathers have in receiving parent education, which delivery systems are most effective for mothers versus fathers, and what outcomes are most important to focus on in educating fathers.

As a source of information on parenting and family life, the *Father Times* newsletter was ranked by fathers as the highest in usefulness of any formal source. However, unlike some prior research findings, which found parenting newsletters to be the most preferred source of information on parenting and family life, (e.g., Doescher et al., 1997; Merkowitz et al. 1997), the highest ranked source of information reported in this study was the participant's spouse or mother of their child. All informal sources of information, such as relatives and friends, were ranked higher in usefulness than the formal sources.

This may be due somewhat to the fact that the period of exposure to the *Father Times* newsletter was relatively brief (6 weeks). It also indicates that fathers may tend to prefer informal sources of information on parenting. As a first option, fathers may be more likely to value information gained from a spouse, parent, or friend. The ranking of the newsletter as most valued among formal sources of information, however, illustrates its significant potential as a source of education.

Key findings that deserve consideration and which can be applied to current practices in preparing educational materials and parent education efforts, include the following.

- Fathers and father figures are likely to respond positively to a newsletter resource that targets them specifically.
- Fathers and father figures typically turn first to informal sources, particularly a spouse or mother of their child, for information on parenting and family life. Making educational information part of a father's "social network" is thus important to reaching them in parent education.

- Fathers and father figures are likely to value an educational newsletter more highly than other formal sources of information on parenting.
- Fathers and father figures most value educational features that focus on key development needs of children, activities for engaging with children, and research facts they can use in parenting their children.
- Fathers and father figures value a variety of parenting topics in an educational newsletter, particularly those related to communication, feelings, reading, and guidance of children.

Fathers represent a large and generally underserved audience in parent education efforts, whether in Extension programs or other community programs. The findings from the study reported here have shown that a resource such as the *Father Times* parenting newsletter is perceived as valuable in multiple ways by fathers and father figures.

References

Bogenschneider, K., & Stone, M. (1997). Delivering parent education to low and high risk parents of adolescents via age-paced newsletters. *Family Relations*, *46*, 123-134.

Cudaback, D., Darden, C., Nelson, P., O'Brien, S., Pinsky, D., & Wiggins, E. (1985). Becoming successful parents: Can age paced newsletters help? *Family Relations*, *34*, 271-275.

Doescher, S., Pratt, C., Allen, T., & Grobe, D. (1997). Parenting the first year newsletter evaluation: Final report. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Extension Service.

Doherty, W. J., Kouneski, E. F., & Erickson, M. F. (1998). Responsible fathering: An overview and conceptual framework. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *60*, 277-292.

Dollahite, D. C., & Hawkins, A. J. (1998). A conceptual ethic of generative fathering. *Journal of Men's Studies*, *7*, 109-132.

Garton, M., Hicks, K., Leatherman, M., Miltenberger, M., Mulkeen, P., Nelson-Mitchell, L., & Winland, C. (2003). Newsletters: Treasures or trash? Parenting newsletter series results in positive behavior changes. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], *41*(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003february/rb5.shtml>

Lamb, M. E. (Ed.). (1997). *The role of the father in child development* (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley.

Martin, S. S., & Weigel, D. J. (2001). Age-paced parenting materials and child maltreatment: Can newsletters make a difference? Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations, November 2001, Rochester, New York.

Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 1173-1191.

Merkowitz, R. F., Jelly, K., Collins, E., & Arkin, C. F. (1997). Backpack buddies: A newsletter series for parents. *Journal of Extension*, [On-line] *35*(5). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1997october/iw3.html>

Palm, G. F. (1997). Promoting generative fathering through parent and family education. In A. J. Hawkins & D. C. Dollahite (Eds.), *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives* (pp. 167-182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Riley, D., Meinhardt, G., Nelson, C., Salisbury, M. J., & Winnett, T. (1991). How effective are age-paced newsletters for new parents? A replication and extension of earlier studies. *Family Relations*, *40*(3) p. 247-253.

Walker, S. K. (2005). Use of a parenting newsletter series and other child-rearing information sources by mothers of infants. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, *34*(2), 153-172.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)