

# RESEARCH BRIEF

## Exploring Photo Elicitation to Engage Head Start Families of Children with Disabilities

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This study sought to identify effective ways of engaging families experiencing multiple risk factors including caring for young children with disabilities, to work collaboratively with Head Start professionals when planning and implementing family-centered interventions. This study specifically examined the collaborative relationship between families and Head Start Family Service Workers and the potential utility of using photo elicitation to support greater collaboration by empowering families to share their personal stories through the use of photographs. Findings from this study will begin to address the need for identifying innovative strategies for building family capacity with Head Start families, specifically those caring for young children with an identified developmental delay or disability.

Photo Elicitation is a qualitative research method that allows researchers the opportunity to examine participants' experiences that are not readily observable such as "feelings, thoughts, or intentions." Photo elicitation involves the examination of photographs as well as a discussion of the meaning or interpretation of the photographs.

(Richard & Lahman, 2015; Torre & Murphy, 2015)

### Benefits of Photo Elicitation

- ✓ Supports in-depth participant responses
- ✓ Assists in memory recollection
- ✓ Shifts power from the researcher to the participant
- ✓ Assists with building rapport and trust
- ✓ Empowers participants to share personal experiences that may be difficult to express without the support of photographs
- ✓ Can be used with individuals across the age span

"It is important to appreciate that the photographs themselves are not the focus of the photo elicitation interview method; rather, it is the meaning and significance attributed to the image by the participant that is of research interest."

(Smith, Gidlow, & Steel, 2012, p. 375)

### Research Questions

1. What strategies do families report their Family Service Workers use to learn what it is like to care for a child with a disability?
2. What are families' perceptions regarding the use of photo elicitation as a way to "tell their story" to Family Service Workers?
3. What strategies do Family Service Workers report using to engage families in "telling their story" about caring for a child with a disability?
4. What do Family Service Workers perceive are the benefits and barriers to using photo elicitation to learn families' stories?

Data were collected via:

- **Photo elicitation interviews** with Head Start families (n = 19 families representing 25 children)
- **Focus groups** with Head Start Family Service Workers (n = 17 Family Service Workers representing 4 Head Start programs)

## Findings

Head Start families caring for young children with disabilities and Family Service Workers described similar, effective strategies for “learning a family’s story” that included building rapport through personal interactions (e.g., gathering relevant information, being responsive to the families’ strengths and priorities, and “meeting the family where they are,” etc.); respecting the families’ decisions; conducting home visits that were flexible, engaging and provided choices; and utilizing effective communication strategies. Families also appreciated when Family Service Workers would go “above and beyond” what might be expected of them or typical for their role. Family Service Workers spoke of serving as a resource, being responsive and family-focused, providing emotional support when families were having difficulty accepting a diagnosis, and engaging in professional development and peer-to-peer networking opportunities.

### Is Photo Elicitation Helpful?

#### Head Start Families Said...

- “Yes, because I think I could communicate more of our day to day life, and then you can picture it. If a picture's a thousand words, it's easy just to get your point across better or your needs across more, and it also gives a chance to brag about your kid. When you are in a program and they have deficiencies, it's nice sometimes just to be able to brag for a second and say, ‘Look how good they are at these puzzles,’ or whatever it is.”
- “I think it gives you like a ... insight of mine.”
- “But then at the same time, pictures can kind of be misleading, so you have to watch it. You have to make sure that you're not taking ...that you're taking the right kind of pictures.”
- “To me, no. I think if you really want to get to know somebody and know what their lifestyle is, I think spending a day with them shadowing them...that's where you're gonna figure it out the most.”

#### Head Start Family Service Workers Said...

- “A big part of relationships is having empathy for our parents because we don’t know what they deal with outside of what we see with our eyes, and a lot of times that can be...that can be huge in their life.”
- “Once people start showing you pictures, you get the information from it that you choose to get from it, so just making sure that you’re listening and you’re listening for the important points. If a parent keeps on highlighting a specific event or a specific thing, be like, ‘Oh, maybe you wanna take note of that because it’s clearly important to them.’”
- “Our parents...sometimes they hesitate to tell you how bad it is because they think you’re gonna report them. So are they really gonna take true pictures?”
- “We would have to really explain it, exactly what we were looking for without leading them.”

**For more information, please contact Kimberly Hile at [kimberly.hile@uah.edu](mailto:kimberly.hile@uah.edu).**

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