Conscious Fathering: Engaging Expectant Dads During the Golden Moment and Equipping Them to Thrive

Parents as Teachers™

By Bernie Dorsey

It seems as though new parenthood can be pretty stressful. Just ask anyone who has had a baby in the last, say, 50 years. As quickly as those first few weeks pass, while you are in the moment, it feels as though it will be an eternity.

New things come along that strive to make life easier for new dads and moms. There are never-ending lists of products that we somehow can just not live without or a new technique that promises to be the answer to all that we desire, which is usually sleep. But the basic things are usually all that babies really need, and the most basic is a partnership where their mom and dad share as equally as possible in the care and nurturing of their new child.

However, it is impossible to be a competent partner in caring for a new baby if you know little or nothing about infants. Conscious Fathering, a program developed in 1999, gives expectant fathers a chance to play a little catchup (and, in some cases, a lot of catchup!) in that area. It helps men to not only be better prepared to meet the challenges of new fatherhood, but to parent with mom in partnership.

Usually, men on the eve of fatherhood are ill equipped for the job ahead. It's not surprising, actually, when you consider that up until a few months previously (usually shortly after the "Hey, honey, guess what?" talk) most guys hadn't given fatherhood too much thought. They may have given it some, as in when someone says, "You are going to be such a good dad someday," but beyond that, not much. It's OK, really. It's normal. After all, guys weren't even allowed into the delivery room until the mid-'60s.

Men have been backed into a little bit of a corner when it comes to preparing for fatherhood. The models society puts forth for them to absorb are not always the most positive influence on competent fathering. Beyond their own fathers, or absence thereof, where are they receiving any experience or training? Usually with siblings, friends' kids, or nieces and nephews. Rarely are they unsupervised.

Although the majority of new dads are anxious to get in there and help out, days count, and the earlier they are involved the stronger the bond. So much of parenthood is instinctive, yet if we fail to trust or develop those instincts, what are we to do?

In the Conscious Fathering program, happening in hospitals all over Puget Sound, men are sitting down and learning about babies. There is something magical about a room full of guys in varying states of preparation for their journey to parenthood. Maybe they will discuss the room they are painting, where they last shopped for the latest car seat, or who rates what stroller the best. Almost never will they talk about the latest fathering book they read.

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The interesting thing is that they are usually talking about mom and how she is doing. It's an important point to make. There is a lot of anxiety for a new dad that comes from not only not knowing much about babies, but also not knowing how mom will fare through the whole process.

In the Conscious Fathering class, the very first thing these soon-to-be-new dads learn is there is only one thing they cannot do, breastfeed. For two and a half hours, they learn as much as possible about everything else: the very basics of what their children need and how they can meet those needs.

Conscious Fathering is about learning to parent using "Parenting C.P.R.," a philosophy that teaches dads (and moms) to be "consistent, predictable, and reliable" in meeting the needs of their children. Every attendee receives a doll, onesie, sleeper or jumper, diaper, wash cloth, and a receiving blanket to use during the class. They learn that a baby has five basic needs, that these needs create a cycle of care, and that their job is to not only react to their baby's needs, but to anticipate what the next need may be. In using the dolls to practice with (no one seems willing to loan them real newborns), they can simulate holding, burping, changing, and swaddling a baby.

A lot of emphasis is placed on caring for the crying infant. Different ideas for soothing baby are discussed – in addition to making sure everyone caring for the baby has a plan to deal with frustration.

Conscious Fathering is a proactive approach to new fatherhood, and it's way more than infant care. It's about building a definition that empowers men to feel as though they can do this, they can be and do what good fathers are and do, and they can do it from the very first moments of their baby's life.

What Fathers Are Saying

"I got a lot out of the program. If I had to pick the most, it would involve the first aid session. I learned a lot about reacting to a child's cold and when it is time to panic. My son is the most important thing in my life, and anything to keep him safe helps me."

– M. H., Dads in the Mix, Allegheny Intermediate Unit

Bernie Dorsey is the founder of the Conscious Fathering Program, which teaches prenatal and childhood involvement skills to thousands of fathers throughout the nation. Dorsey provides infant care skills for soon-to-be dads while stressing the benefits of responsible fathering. He has personally taught more than 10,000 fathers during the past 12 years, and through the partnership created by the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood program, Conscious Fathering is now available in over 30 locations in 11 states.

Dorsey, who lives in Seattle with his wife of 29 years and 17-year-old son, has been a guest speaker at numerous statewide and national workshops on the topic of fathering and families. In addition, Dorsey's *Guide for Expectant Fathers* is currently being distributed nationwide. He has also produced videos focused on preventing shaken baby syndrome and on postpartum depression awareness. His current work focuses on creating parental balance within systems that serve families.

Last updated: November 2, 2011

Dads on Duty: Service to Country and Family

By Joe Buehrle

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Our nation's military fathers and their families face an unprecedented context. Between 2001 and 2008, there was a ten-fold increase in the number of Department of Defense troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (Belasco, 2009). The high operational pace of the current conflicts – and the resulting lengthy and frequent deployments – can take a toll on children (Chandra, et al., 2009).

As young fathers arrive back home, not only has their family been measurably changed after their long absence, they themselves have also been impacted by their experiences, not to mention the stereotypes and societal pressures to be a "man," particularly for dads heavily imbued in the military-soldier culture.

San Diego County is home to the largest population of military family children ages birth to 18 in the nation (Promises 2 Kids, 2010). The constant stresses of deployment and reunion put an extreme burden on young military families, and while traditionally, various resources have been put in place for mothers, very few resources are available for military dads. Yet recent research confirms what many in family strengthening roles have known for years regarding language development, attachment, social ability, etc.: The unique role of a father is imperative to the developmental health and growth of a young child (MacDermid, Samper, Schwarz, Nishida, & Nyaronga, 2008).

Recognizing this service gap, in 2008 the Parents as Teachers National Center chose SAY San Diego's Healthy Start Military Family Resource Center for its innovation in collaborating with the military to form Dads On Duty, a program uniquely tailored to young military dads with kids ages birth to 5. To date more than 150 fathers have completed Dads on Duty, which uses evidence-based practices through peer-to-peer group sessions and tailored home visits.

Dads on Duty facilitators quickly learned that engaging military fathers would require some flexibility and creativity. Three quick lessons learned include:

1. The service members' schedule is not their own. This meant evening sessions and a program that did not last more than six weeks were a must to accommodate duty and deployment cycles.
2. Child care, dinner and gift card incentives made coming possible, but it was not why dads came each week. The men genuinely wanted to be better dads. They just needed the affirmation and skills to feel confident.
3. The stigma that men don't want to ask for "help" does not apply to driving directions. Dads on Duty uses a strengths-based peer-to-peer learning model where the men have opportunities to be both teachers and learners.

Overall, when dads are given a safe space to share, reflect, learn, and grow, the responses and feedback from participants have been overwhelming. The data and pre/post tests confirm program successes of fathers toward building protective factors for family functioning/resiliency (e.g., social connections, concrete support, knowledge of parenting, and child development, and nurturing and attachment).

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Yet we find the dads' own stories best capture the program impact. One Navy father shared that he did not realize the impact of sea duty and drills (time away) on his child. During a father-child exercise, tears came to his eyes observing what his young son was now developmentally able to do.

In the words of Dads on Duty participant Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Andy Thomas, a first-time father of twin boys, "Sometimes we have to put duty before family even though family is our number one priority." Yet, through Dads on Duty, "aside from getting support, we learn we are not the only people going through stuff like this, and that is very reassuring."

Stories of Impact

A Marine father shared that, upon returning from Afghanistan, he did not go home. He disappeared for over two days. He had been in such a different mental space for so long, and transitioning back he feared he would be a stranger in his own home and that his young children would not recognize him. Dads on Duty facilitators later observed a massive confidence shift, seeing this strapping young father, little ones in his arms, all with huge smiles, while he animatedly read a children's story to them.

By Joe Buehrle

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The Difference Between "Deadbeat" and "Dead Broke" Fathers

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By Cheri D. Tillis

"Fathers love their children." This is a phrase that we at Fathers' Support Center, St. Louis have used over the years in the introduction of presentations, at conferences, and in speaking engagements around the United States. We use it because the noncustodial father has become a source of ridicule and disdain to many who have had to grow up without him fully participating in their lives.

Because of the structure of the child support laws in this country for noncustodial parents, there is nothing that empowers noncustodial fathers. The Center for Family Policy and Practice noted in an article titled "BEST Incomes for Noncustodial Parents Paying Child Support" that a noncustodial parent of two children paying 25 percent of his or her income for child support would need to earn $40,016 – more than two and a half times the minimum wage – in order to also pay for basic monthly expenses and have economic security (Center for Family Policy and Practice, 2011).

If the noncustodial father wants to be an active father, he is subject to the whims of the custodial parent and/or gatekeeper. In many situations, the decision to allow him to visit with his children comes down to one thing: Is he paying his child support? A child support payment for some dads has become the golden ticket to interacting with their children. Unfortunately, if he is unable to pay he, is not given access to his children. Consequently, for many unemployed men being "dead broke" has also given them the stigma of being "deadbeat."

When you think "Deadbeat Dad," what is the picture that you see? A dad who doesn't take care of his children? Someone who drives a fancy car or spends his money on himself without thinking about the needs of his children? You may even think of someone who has children that he never sees and for whom he provides minimum financial support, if any, while meanwhile he does provide for his wife's, girlfriend's, or significant other's children. Well, if this is your picture of a deadbeat dad, I agree with you.

However, I would like to open your eyes to the "Dead Broke Dad." The increase of poverty among noncustodial fathers is closely linked to their diminished ability to find full-time employment since the start of the recession in 2007. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, "Since 2007, the number of men working full time, year round with earnings decreased by 6.6 million" (2011, para. 12). The income of all single male households decreased by 7.9 percent from 2007 to 2010, falling to a median of $35,627.

As stated earlier, fathers love their children. Unfortunately, sometimes a father is unable to contribute financially to his family. This is the dad who maybe lost his job and hasn't been able to find additional employment, thus leaving him unable to contribute. This is the dad who will spend time with his children and has their best interest at heart, but because he is not employed he cannot buy the name-brand tennis shoes or latest electronics. This is also the dad who makes an emotional and spiritual investment in his family. He is a father in every sense of the word, providing the stability that comes with having a caring father.

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When working with "Dead Broke Dads," the best thing that you can do is encourage them to never give up. It will be essential to provide a multitude of referrals and resources that can assist them with securing the basic needs of life. It will also be essential to provide them with opportunities to bond with their children. Bonding outings are a tool we like to use at the agency. They consist of planning an activity, providing transportation, and maybe purchasing a meal. This allows a father to treat his children to activities that he is unable to afford.

Another tool I'd suggest is a guide to free family events offered by community organizations that fathers can participate in with their children and a list of free places they can go such as parks and festivals.

I will say it again: Fathers love their children and are an essential component of every child's life.

What Fathers Are Saying

"I was fortunate enough to attend the Train Time activity with my own two boys, ages 4 and 2. When we arrived at the gymnasium at Davisville Elementary School, I was still filling out the sign-in sheet when my boys clamored past me to join in the excitement. That particular morning, there were perhaps a baker's dozen of kids running from station to station of the various activities provided. The environment was clean, friendly, and well-organized.

Towards the end of the hour-long activity period, I was surprised to see how much time had elapsed, which is always a good indicator of the level of fun experienced. An informal poll I conducted among the fathers present that day revealed that most had already become regulars at the Saturday morning activities, which typically take place once or twice a month.

Although the group there was certainly lively, it was clear that the place had plenty of room for more young revelers. As for my own possible return to future activities, the deal was sealed when my older son looked up unprompted from cleaning up the mess to say, "Can we come back next time?"
– K. H., PAT's Fatherhood Initiative, North Kingstown, Rhode Island

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Engaging Fathers in the Home Visiting Model

By Deb Meiklejohn

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This article was retrieved from the August 2011 newsletter published by Circle of Parents® for the Partners for Kids project.

We use the Parents as Teachers Model, conducting monthly home visits with families who have children from birth to age 3. We had some success engaging fathers with the support groups and the Conscious Fathering™ Program, but the Parents as Teachers home visits had the biggest impact.

Successes

We made sure that the home visitors were able to be flexible in their scheduling so they could schedule the home visits when the fathers were available. Before we received the grant for the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Community Access Program, we would schedule the visits within the parent educator's (home visitor's) schedule. When we would go on a visit and there were handouts that were important for dad to see, we would say, "Make sure you share these with dad," so that meant the information always went through mom. With the intention of getting dads more involved, we had to be much more flexible in offering evening and Saturday visits so we could be sure the father was going to be there. We also made sure dad was available, and if mom was there, then that was the best scenario – but we wanted to make sure the dad was engaged.

From the home visitors' perspectives, it was exciting to see how engaged the dads were in these visits and how likely they were to participate in the follow-up activities that were suggested by the home visitor. If we left activities to do or to expand on, dads were really eager to do them. They really enjoyed seeing their children engaged in the activities and seeing what they were capable of doing. A lot of the dads would remark, " I didn't know he could do that." They were so impressed with their children's skills that it was fun for them to see how their child was developing as we pointed out things that sometimes parents take for granted because they see their child every day. When you bring it to their attention and say, "See that, see the thing they just did, that's a whole new skill," it's really an exciting thing.

It did not take any time at all for the dads to participate. Right off the bat they were engaged. As soon as we made home visiting more available to them, they got right into it. We brought them into the home visit as a partner in what we were doing and not an observer. Also, we encouraged dads to be engaged with their child in whatever we were doing on the particular day.

Challenges

There were a few challenges with this new intention of engaging dads. For instance, we had to first get the staff members of the different programs to realize that they had to branch out a little bit and be more flexible with their schedule. Asking people to be that flexible when you're talking about evenings and Saturdays was difficult at first. With our participants, there was the initial challenge

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of scheduling the visit through mom. Moms would usually say things like, "Oh no, 3 o'clock is good because that's when they get up from their nap, and that's a good time," but we would have to say, "No, we would really like you both there, so we will work with you to pick a better time." We needed to convince some moms that we needed dad there as well.

We also found that because our Parents as Teachers program was already in existence, this was a little bit of a change for some families who were used to the visits only involving mom and the children. If it was a family we were already working with, we needed to say, "It is very important that we bring dad in." It was much easier to initiate this with new families because dad was asked to be involved from the beginning.

Lastly, we noticed that because it was usually a mom who enrolled the family in the program, mom was the initial contact. We addressed all mail to the mother, and when we called the house, we asked for mom. We stopped to take a look at that and said, "It's not just mom; we're enrolling the family. Why are we sending the mail to mom?" So the program actually looked at its mailing list and if we didn't have dad's name on that envelope, we included it. We changed all of our electronic distribution lists and dad was included as a contact.

Tip from the Field **Father-friendly assessment**

"The father-friendly assessment was helpful because it was a way for us to identify areas where we had some strengths and areas where we had some weaknesses. It also brought things to our attention that in the course of our day we wouldn't notice. For example, we looked around the room at our décor. We had to ask ourselves, "Is it friendly to fathers or is it just attractive to mothers?" We took that for granted and, with a staff of all women, we might not have stopped and said, "Oh, you know, this room might not appeal to dads."

We really made sure posters and decorations we had on the wall reflected moms and dads and all types of families. Even though we are making sure that we are father friendly, we really want to be family friendly at the same time.

By Deb Meiklejohn

Lessons learned

The best evidence of our success is related to sustainability. We used the funds to provide technical assistance statewide to all home visitors, and not just those directly impacted by the project. These home visitors have now imbedded the importance of fathers into their day-to-day work, which has changed the way we operate. It also increased our capacity to positively impact more families.

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Enhancing Parenting Skills of Low-Income Fathers Through Fatherhood Group Meetings

By Tomoko Wakabayashi, Karen A. Guskin, and Jan Watson

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Introduction

Fathers interact with their children in ways different from mothers, contributing equally and importantly to children's healthy and optimal development (Turner, 2009). Nevertheless, according to the U.S Census Bureau report (Kreider, 2008), the percentage of father-absent homes continues to rise nationally, with 1 out of every 3 of America's children (34.5 percent) living apart from their biological fathers.

There are also cultural and societal barriers that associate taking care of children with female roles. Fathers consequently have been found to show less interest in participating in parent education programs and other efforts that support parents to become the first and the best teachers of their children (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 2006). Home visiting programs are no exception.

Funded by a Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Federal Grant, the current project was initiated at multiple sites across the country to increase father participation in Parents as Teachers and increase fathers' knowledge of child development, enhance fathers' parenting skills, and encourage fathers to become more engaged and influential in their children's everyday lives.

The project involved organizing and offering a series of 12 fatherhood group meetings to low-income fathers whose families are already enrolled in a local site of the parent education and family support program, and hence already receive monthly home visits.

Method

Questions:

- How successful have the fatherhood group meeting sessions been in recruiting fathers to participate in home visits?
- How have the fatherhood group meetings and the home visits, together, impacted low-income fathers' parenting skills and knowledge?

Participants: 175 low-income resident fathers (ages 15 to 58, mean age =31) who live with their children ages prenatal to kindergarten entry were served with at least eight hours of skill-based parenting education through fatherhood group meetings. The series of 12 meetings was typically held weekly. Services were provided at seven sites across the United States.

Data collection: Fathers completed a brief demographic survey as well as open-ended questions about their expectations for the group meetings at the beginning of the group meeting sessions and changes they experienced as a result of the group meetings.

In addition, 58 fathers completed the Protective Factors Survey at the beginning and the end of a 12-session group meeting series (pre-test and post-test). The Protective Factors Survey is a valid and reliable outcomes tool developed by the FRIENDS National Center in collaboration with University of Kansas. The partner sites also reported on their challenges and lessons learned.

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Table 1: Participant characteristics

Marital status		Ethnicity/race		Educational level	
Married	55%	White	50%	Some high school	16%
Single	21%	Black	30%	HS diploma/GED	39%
Divorced	5%	Hispanic/Latino	13%	Trade/vocational	5%
Separated	2%	More than two races	1%	Some college	18%
Living with partner	16%			2-year college	11%
Widower	1%	Other	7%	4-year college +	12%

Results and analysis

How successful have the fatherhood group meetings been in recruiting fathers to participate in home visits? The results suggest that the fatherhood group meetings were successful in engaging fathers in home visits. More fathers, after joining the fatherhood group, became actively involved in the monthly home visits. While 30 percent of the families served by Parents as Teachers programs nationwide reported that fathers participated in at least one home visit during the 2008-2009 program year, 62 percent of the fathers in the current project participated in at least one home visit. These fathers participated in an average of 3.23 visits during a 12-session fatherhood group meeting series.

How have the fatherhood group meetings and the home visits, together, impacted low-income fathers' parenting skills and knowledge? First, father participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions were analyzed and coded. In the beginning, fathers had broad goals of becoming "better fathers," followed by improving parenting skills and knowledge and making friends/interacting and sharing thoughts with other fathers. By the end, substantially more fathers reported improving their communication/relationships with their children and spouse, becoming more patient, and helping their children learn (see Table 2). Chi-square was performed on primary responses of 47 fathers, coded into six categories (better father, improved parenting, improved communication, self-care/self-development, patience, and other). The result showed that the fathers' expressed goals before and after the intervention differed significantly at $X2\ (5)=83.31, p<.005$. The results are also supported by anecdotes from the group facilitators from partner sites.

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Table 2: All fathers' open-ended responses

What would like to achieve from attending this group?							
Be a better dad	Improve parenting skills/gain knowledge	Improve communication/ relationships with child or spouse	Make friends/ interact with other fathers/share thoughts	Self-care/ self development			Other
49%	33%	9%	21%	15%			4%
What changes have you made in your personal life or family life as a result of attending fatherhood group meetings?							
Be a better dad	Improve parenting skills/gain knowledge	Improve communication/ relationships with child or spouse	Make friends/ interact with other fathers/share thoughts	Self-care/ self development	Patience with children/ others	Learning	Other
12%	30%	46%	2%	17%	19%	9%	3%

Second, pre-post scores from the Protective Factors Survey collected from 58 fathers were analyzed using paired t-tests. Positive changes were detected in four areas: family functioning/resiliency ($t(57)=-3.47$, $p=.001$), concrete support ($t(57)=-2.509$, $p=.015$), nurturing and attachment ($t(56)=-3.245$, $p=.002$), and one of the child development/knowledge of parenting items (#13 "I know how to help my child learn," $t(57)=-3.715$, $p<.001$).

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What fathers say changed …

"More patience, explaining more. A better understanding of behaviors from kids. To see signs of anger or frustration and know when to step away or take a deep breath." – Father participant

"Teaching through play. Setting a routine with my child makes it a lot easier" – Father participant

"Today I am sober. Today I feel more equip (sic) to be a dad and father. Today I am motivated." – Father participant

"My everyday life is more open. I notice my kids more and more." – Father participant

What facilitators say changed …

"Their new understanding of age appropriate behavior regarding their children. …We have also observed that many of the fathers have found their parenting styles to be too authoritarian and that it is not developmentally appropriate to view their children as 'mini soldiers.'" – J. Buehrle and T. Lewis (Dads on Duty), CA

"The fathers shared knowledge they probably wouldn't have shared anywhere else. Some fathers shared more of a bond from going through this training." – M. Smith, PA

"The most observed change … has been [that dads are] more involved in the everyday lives of the children." – B. Irion, IL

Challenges and lessons learned

The challenges partner sites reported fall into two major categories:

Recruitment

- Collaborating with community; getting buy-in from agency staff
- Getting the fathers through the door

Engagement and retention

- Scheduling issues (e.g., sick child, overtime work, prior engagement)
- Special populations (e.g., language issues, military fathers/deployment, incarceration)

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"The biggest recruitment challenge is probably just to get dads to show up to the first group. Every dad that showed up to an actual group has come back." – T. Vestal, MO

"The challenge is to persuade men that the center is not just for women and children…" – A. Johnson, PA

"Get everyone within your agency to buy into the dads' program. Form partnerships and relationships because this will help with recruitment. If given the chance most of these dads want to become better fathers, better men and better husbands." – F. Velasquez, WA

Conclusions

Low-income fathers who participated in at least eight hours of skill-based parenting education through fatherhood group meetings had higher participation rates in home visits and reported improved skills and knowledge of parenting, enhanced communication/relationships with children, and improved patience and understanding of age-appropriate behaviors. In addition, fathers showed increases in family functioning/ resiliency, concrete support, nurturing and attachment, and one measure of child development/knowledge of parenting, as measured by the Protective Factors Survey.

These findings suggest that providing a combination of father-focused group meetings along with home visits can increase fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives.

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Facilitating Quality Father Groups

By Nigel Vann

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While individual home or office visits can be invaluable in your work with fathers, for many fathers it is participation in a group with other men that is most meaningful. I've heard fatherhood group work described as the "glue" that keeps men involved in a wider program and leads to powerful life changes for them and their families.

For this to occur, a fatherhood group needs to be built and facilitated on a foundation of trust that encourages self-reflection, personal sharing, group support, and ongoing growth.

I've had the privilege of sitting in on many fatherhood groups in the United States and in England and have enjoyed many examples of strong group facilitation, but I've also observed poor or average group facilitation that failed to fully engage the dads in attendance. Three of the most common reasons I've identified for poor group facilitation are:

1. Insufficient preparation time. (I advise you spend at least twice as much time preparing as you will facilitating.)
2. Lack of purpose. (You should always be aware of why you are doing this work – have immediate goals for a particular session and long-term goals for the group.)
3. Ineffective facilitation. (This includes disorganization, too much lecturing, personal storytelling irrelevant to group goals, not managing problem group behaviors, a boring approach, a judgmental attitude, and so on).

On the other hand, good group facilitators are well-prepared and clear about the objectives. They are focused on the journey that the group members are embarking on and have a clear vision of the kinds of changes in attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors that they hope to inspire the fathers towards. To successfully guide their participants on this journey, they:

- Engage them in the process of growth and learning through varied types of activities.
- Are aware of the needs of individual group members.
- Spend time listening to and learning from the group.
- Know how to keep things on track by encouraging participation.
- Manage difficult people.
- Deal with problematic issues that come up.
- Keep a focus on outcomes by encouraging the application of new skills.

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Facilitation skills

A book that I recommend for further reading is *Workshops: Designing and Facilitating Experiential Learning*. Although this does not focus on fatherhood groups per se, it does provide some very helpful ideas. I particularly like the authors' delineation of four types of basic facilitation skills (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999), which I interpret as follows:

1. **Engaging** – Creating a welcoming and safe environment that draws participants in and encourages them to stay.
2. **Informing** – Providing knowledge and information that is meaningful and useful to participants, through a variety of approaches that engage and involve participants in the sharing of knowledge.
3. **Involving** – Ensuring that all group members are able to participate and benefit from the group activities and discussion.
4. **Applying** – Allowing time for reflection about key take-home messages and encouraging the use of new awareness, knowledge, and skills to build stronger relationships and outcomes for children and families.

Stages of group development

Don't expect men to start sharing and supporting each other instantly! All groups go through various stages of development. In the **Forming** stage, everything will seem new, and participants will feel wary and unsure. The role of the group facilitator is key here – you need to draw on those engaging skills (creating a welcoming environment, providing guidance and direction, and establishing that the group is "safe").

Next comes a **Storming** stage where the facilitator's ability to listen and deal with issues of conflict or competition may be key.

In the **Norming** stage, the group coalesces around common goals, shares a sense of group belonging, and embraces group process and mutual support. Some individual members will begin to have "a-ha" moments, and leadership will be shared.

The fourth stage of **Performing** is what we are striving for. The group will be more task oriented and comfortable engaging in problem solving; most members will be aware of key take-home messages; and the facilitator will be able to take a back seat at times as the group "performs."

One of the hardest stages is **Adjourning**. You have created a meaningful group experience for members, but now you must say farewell and leave individuals to proceed on the next stage of their journeys without the group.

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This is where the work that a good group facilitator has done can really have a payoff. If you have been prepared and clearly focused on your goals; if you have utilized an array of interesting, stimulating and engaging activities; if you have managed the group process in a way that encourages the participation of all; and if you have encouraged reflection on a-ha moments and take-home messages and challenged participants to apply their new knowledge and skills with tangible actions – then you have done your job.

Tip from the Field **Take the Fear out of Feelings**

Many times feelings can be a sensitive or difficult topic to approach, whether it is in a relationship, with a co-worker, or with children. As humans we all feel, and we know what we feel. The problem for many is talking about or expressing those feelings.

Knowing this made me very apprehensive to approach this topic within our fatherhood meeting. Having heard the background of many of these men over the months, I thought for sure this would be a dead topic, that I would be made to look like a fool for even trying to speak about feelings. Boy, was I wrong.

I had planned to have the topic of feelings cover two sessions, with the hopes of scratching the surface of feelings and maybe giving some tools or hints for the men to ponder. What happened was far greater. The fathers in the group were surprisingly open to sharing their feelings on many personal and sensitive topics. The other facilitator and I added our feelings into the discussions and even opened up about very personal things.

These very intense dialogues and conversations monopolized most of the two meetings that I scheduled for this topic and stretched over the next two meetings as well. The topic's popularity has caused us to add a section at the end of each meeting to discuss any feeling that fathers want to share.

Working with men, you have a certain expectation of how most of them will react, but this was a pleasant surprise. This has become valuable knowledge that will help to enhance our fatherhood program in the future. It has taught me that all you have to do to get men to open up is to take the fear out of feelings.

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Group Connection: The Personal Power of Masculine Readers

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By Michael Hall

When most people think about parent-child reading activities, they likely picture a mother quietly reading to her children. Very few people would envision a reading event where fathers and children are acting like donkeys, elephants, and gorillas. That is exactly what happens, however, at a Dad and Kid Reading Night sponsored by Strong Fathers-Strong Families.

Dad and Kid Reading Night encourages and teaches fathers to read to their children. The books are carefully chosen both to reflect the father-child dynamic and to facilitate lively activity.

Suggested Books

The most useful books for this type of activity are based on a positive father-child relationship, a set of positive interactions, or both. Here are the books that Strong Fathers-Strong Families has made a standard for this program every time it is presented to dads and kids in schools and Head Start programs.

Head to Toe by Eric Carle

This book is used as a warm-up to get everyone moving and allows the fathers to slowly become a part of the activity. It is also the activity that promotes participants to act like giraffes, buffaloes, donkeys, monkeys, and gorillas.

Guess How Much I Love You by Sam McBratney and Anita Jeram

This book illustrates a loving relationship between father and son nutbrown hares. When used at reading night, it allows for fathers and children to literally show how much they love each other with outstretched arms and legs.

Going on a Bear Hunt by Michael Rosen

This well-known story and song is presented in a beautifully illustrated book encourages fun interaction for dads and kids with lots of predictability and repeating text.

Octopus Hug by Laurence Pringle

This book provides activities for dads and kids to do at home. It has a great story about a dad who stays with the kids while the mom is gone to dinner. Watching a group of fathers all give their kids an "octopus hug" (with eight arms) makes the all the effort you put into the event well worth it.

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The strength of interactivity

Interactivity is an integral part of the program because men tend to more easily be engaged through activity and fathers tend to engage kids in more rough-and-tumble play. Researchers say that this rough play can have a powerful positive impact on children, fostering curiosity and teaching them to regulate emotion and enjoy surprises (Pruett, 2000). By using a strengths-based approach with fathers, practitioners can encourage and teach them to spend more time in reading *their way* to their children.

Just as boys and girls are different and men and women are different, we must recognize that mothers and fathers are different (Pruett, 2000; Lamb, 1997; Park, 1995). Fathers and mothers parent differently and interact with their children differently. That difference in parenting styles is also present in how fathers talk to and read to their children. A recent University of North Carolina study found a link between fathers who used varied vocabulary with their 2-year-olds and the children's more advanced speech at age 3, even though the fathers spoke less often to the children than did the mothers. Mothers' vocabulary didn't have a significant impact (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, in press). A study of low-income Early Head Start fathers (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, & Cabrera, 2004) found a link between fathers' stimulating play with their 2-year-olds and better language and cognitive skills in the children a year later, even when controlling for mothers' behavior.

As early as the 1960s, psychologist Ellen Bing found (to her surprise) that children who had fathers who read to them regularly were more likely to do much better in many important cognitive skill categories than children who did not (Bing, 1963). One of the strongest benefits was a substantial increase in a daughter's verbal skills. Telling fathers about these acknowledged paternal strengths can help them understand their own powers as readers.

The strength of relationships

The premise of a Dad and Kid Reading Night is to bring fathers in to experience this power of masculine reading and how it impacts the education of their children. This experience is facilitated by reading to both fathers and children and having them interact with the books that are being read to them.

The event is billed as a "dad and kid" event. Instead of developing catchy titles like "Daddy Read to Me" or "Book Look," the creators of the program used a simple title that helps participants understand that they are invited together to come and interact. By using a title that puts the father and child on an even footing, you can communicate that they both have an important role to play in the process.

The relational aspects of the event are the primary draw to both children and fathers. The relational hook is used as fathers and children are drawn closer and closer together through a series of books that start out on the emotionally "safe" side and then move into more tactile and intimate interactions

like wrestling and hugging. Once the hugging starts, it is usually hard to stop, even among older elementary students. Most fathers are happy to oblige.

Besides taking part in the activities, fathers are also observing other fathers playfully interacting with their children. They are seeing the reaction of their children to both the books and the interplay between them. Therein lies the power of the event. It is not the actual reading of books, it is not the modeling of a masculine style of reading, and it is not the information that is being presented to the fathers during the workshop. Even though those aspects of the program are valuable, it is the interaction with their children during the activity that sells fathers on their personal power as masculine readers.

The strength of outcomes

Even though these events are fun, they must be planned and developed in such a way that they improve children's learning outcomes. There are all kinds of parent-child programs that have fun activities, but this event is designed to maximize the interaction, both verbal and tactile, between father and child. By focusing on the child outcomes, not only can you reach the goals of your program, but you can also begin to form a partnership with the fathers and families.

In order to produce outcomes, the information that is provided to fathers is simple and direct. A tip sheet for fathers on developmentally appropriate reading skills provided by the National Institute for Literacy Institute (2006) is used to give fathers basic tips and hints to help them in their future reading activities. By giving fathers a job to do within their strengths and focusing them on the positive outcomes for their children, you encourage them to join the team. Even if a father does not read well (or cannot read at all), this activity can demonstrate to him that there is power in words shared through stories, specifically stories shared by a father. Although the event encourages reading to the children, fathers are also told that they can have a big impact on their children's literacy just through story-telling and direct verbal and physical interaction with their children.

Many men are embarrassed or intimidated by their lack of competency in reading and/or reading out loud. However, when given options (that are still based on their strengths and in spite of their weaknesses) to benefit their children, they are more likely to rise to the occasion.

The strength of differences

If most educators were to see a Dad and Kid Reading Night in person, they might assume that it is fun – and at times even silly – but that it does not have any impact on student outcomes. However, by speaking to the strengths of the fathers, providing the fathers an opportunity to experience these strengths in a safe environment, and allowing the fathers to see their children's reaction to the activities, this event serves as a solid teaching tool.

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How Fathers' Style of Parenting Benefits Their Children's Development

Parents as Teachers™

By Randell D. Turner, Ph.D.

If you have ever been to the neighborhood playground, you have likely witnessed the distinct differences in the parenting styles of mothers and fathers – maybe without realizing it. See if this scenario rekindles any memories.

A mother and father stroll onto the park's playground. Their rambunctious preschooler is pulling at Dad's arm imploring, "Let's go to the swings, Daddy! Let's go to the swings!"

As the child races ahead with Dad in tow, Mom takes a seat on a bench near the swing set, relaxed yet attentive. Dad places the now-beaming child into the swing's wraparound seat and, from behind the child, begins gently pushing the swing forward. As Dad and child get familiar with the swing's rhythm you can hear the delight in the child's cries of "Mom, look at me!" She responds enthusiastically, "I see you!"

Then Dad asks the age-old question that dads have asked since the invention of the swing: "Do you want to go higher?" To which the child almost always exclaims, "Yes, higher! Daddy, push me higher!"

Just as Dad reaches back to give the child a real good push, you hear Mom say with a tone of caution, "Be careful!" The parents exchange knowing glances as Dad restrains his urge to send their child soaring to the swing's maximum arch.

What you have witnessed in a small way represents the uniqueness between mothers' and a fathers' parenting styles. In general, mothers tend to stress emotional nurturing and personal safety focus while fathers tend to stress autonomy and independence.

Providing a healthy balance of these two parenting styles enables children to grow up in a safe, nurturing environment while challenging them to explore their unique gifts and abilities. However, understanding fathers' parenting style and being able to maximize its uniqueness for the benefit of an individual child's outcomes still remains a mystery for many educators. Understanding the strengths and contributions of fathers' parenting style can add significantly to teaching and learning opportunities that benefit both fathers and children.

A contrast of complementary parenting styles

In general, these traits represent a healthy mother's and father's parenting styles:

- Fathers' parenting style tends to be less predictable and have a more activating physical element, while mothers tend to follow established patterns of physical interaction.
- Fathers are more likely to promote a child's intellectual and social development through physical play, while mothers are more likely to promote intellectual and social development through talking and teaching while caregiving.

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- Fathers tend to teach through example, emphasizing lessons learned from experience, while mothers tend to teach with the focus on learning through a pattern of processing.
- Fathers tend to play by encouraging the child to higher levels of challenge, while mothers tend to play at the child's level, letting the child direct the play, be in charge, and proceed at his own pace.
- Fathers tend to make use of their bodies when interacting with their children. They become a jungle gym, monkey bars, or rocking horse, giving piggy back rides, roughhousing, tickling, wrestling, and so on, following activation-exploration themes. Mothers tend to play in more conventional ways, employing traditional games, songs, and themes.
- Fathers tend to offer less immediate support in face of child's frustration, thus promoting adaptive problem-solving skills. Mothers are more likely to intervene more quickly in face of their child's frustration.
- Fathers tend to discipline with an interest in the societal bottom-line outcome. In other words, they focus on what their child needs to learn in order to be successful in the everyday world. Mothers tend to discipline with focus on the impact of their child's behavior on emotional relationships.

These are just a few of the contrasts between mothers' and fathers' parenting styles. The uniqueness of these two parenting styles contributes significantly to the healthy growth and development of a child. As professionals, we can use this knowledge to educate and guide fathers in ways of maximizing their parenting style to benefit their children.

This will take time and effort, because most fathers don't understand the benefits that they bring to their children's development. However, my experience has been that with a little guidance, encouragement, and opportunity, fathers will become more engaged in their children's lives. As they do, we begin to see the positive influence and benefits it has on their children. After all that's what being a father is all about, nurturing your children so that it enables them not just to succeed and but to soar!

What Fathers Are Saying

"I really enjoyed attending the Dads in the Mix training. We learned hands-on activities that showed us how to get down on a kid's level and work with our kids with small motor skills and lots of hand-eye coordination skills."

– Anonymous, Dads in the Mix, Allegheny Intermediate Unit

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1. Education

There hasn't been a tremendous amount of education to professionals or to parents about this topic. Therefore, I recommend that a concerted effort be made each school year to provided education workshop and information to staff and parents alike. As the staff and parents become more educated, they can begin to incorporate this information into their classrooms, activities, educational materials, and programs throughout the year.

2. Guidance

Once education efforts have become part of your program, providing guidance becomes the next step in the process. For example, since we know that fathers tend to teach through play, parent educators should work with fathers and mothers to develop games to do just that. A good example might be teaching a child how to recognize shapes: To make it a game, have fathers take a 2-inch square wooden cube and draw a different shape (square, triangle, rectangle, and so on, on each face of the cube). They could then create a game card that has the different shapes randomly placed in four rows across by rows down, totaling 16 shapes, some being repeated, similar to a bingo card. Then have the child and father take turns rolling the cube. Whatever shape is on top they mark off on their card. Whoever gets four across, down or diagonally wins. This not only teaches the child to identify shapes, it also teaches social skills of following rules and taking turns.

This same game format can be used for learning colors, numbers, small words, and a variety of other new information.

3. Encouragement

Remember, most fathers have not been told that they can have a positive influence on their child's development by just being who they are. Therefore, consistent encouragement may be needed as fathers try to become more involved and aren't confident in their efforts. That's why educating staff and parents will help encourage father involvement. Because everyone understands the benefits to the child, sincere encouragement will become an easier and more consistent part of your program.

4. Opportunities

Fathers can't and won't apply what they learn unless they have the opportunity. Not that you always have to provide separate "fathers only" activities or programs. You can do this as part of your normal program activities and events. Just make sure you try to integrate events, activities, lessons, and resources that tend to focus on fathers' parenting style. It may take a little extra effort, but remember, the children will benefit the most from your efforts.

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The Important Role of Fathers in the Lives of Young Children

By William Scott and Amy De La Hunt

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Fathers play a significant role in fostering social-emotional, cognitive, language, and motor development in the lives of their young children. Research shows that fathers strengthen development when they take an active role early and often in the lives of their children, even before they are born.

Child development is part of a complex social system that varies widely from family to family (Lamb, 2010). There is no single "right" way for fathers to be involved. Instead, there are many types of father involvement in all aspects of raising a child. These include playing together, being nearby while a child explores, and taking a child for health checkups (Marsiglio, Day, Braver, Evans, Lamb, & Peters, 1998). Research has found that the value of father involvement is determined by the quality of the interaction between fathers and their children – for example, a father's responsiveness to the needs of his child – rather than the amount of time fathers spend with their children (Palkovitz, 2002).

To better understand the unique and specific ways that fathers impact the lives of their children, researchers study the many roles fathers play in child development. The following findings provide insights into how children benefit developmentally from their fathers' involvement.

Social-emotional development

- Early involvement by fathers in the primary care of their child is a source of emotional security for the child (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).
- Fathers' affectionate treatment of their infants contributes to high levels of secure attachment (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).
- When fathers acknowledge their child's emotional response and help them address it with a problem-solving approach, the children score higher on tests of emotional intelligence (Civitas, 2001).
- Quality father-and-child time increases self-esteem, confidence, social competence, and life skills (Amato, 1994).
- Children who have close relationships with their fathers have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be depressed (Dubowitz et al., 2001).
- Mothers may use more parenting techniques of gentleness and security, while fathers may favor independence and confidence-building. These approaches help children understand the world in different ways; they balance each other (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).
- Rough-and-tumble play with fathers can help children manage aggressive impulses and learn to control their emotions during physical activity (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003).
- Fathers' involvement in their children's lives before age 7 may protect against psychological maladjustment during the teen years (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002).

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Intellectual development

- "A number of studies suggest that fathers who are involved, nurturing, and playful with their infants have children with higher IQs, as well as better linguistic and cognitive capacities" (Pruett, 2000, as cited in Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006, Section I.2.2, para. 1).
- Early, positive involvement of fathers in intellectually stimulating activities, physical care, and general caregiving activities is associated with lower levels of cognitive delay as measured by children's babbling and their exploration of objects with a purpose (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, Horowitz, & Kinukawa, 2008).
- Mothers and fathers may have very different styles of play, and their children can benefit from both of them. For example, a father may hold his child's attention with vigorous types of play, including roughhousing that allows the child to take risks and solve problems by using his body, while the child's mother typically may play cooing games and use more toys and books in her play (Parke & Tinsley, 1987).
- Fathers tend to do more than mothers to promote their child's independence and exploration of the outside world (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).
- Fathers are more likely to find new and unexpected ways to play with familiar toys, which expands their child's creative horizons (Ladd, 2000).

Language development

- While both mothers and fathers tend to use the higher-pitched, slowed-down variation of speaking called "parentese," fathers are more likely to speak in ways that challenge their child's developing language abilities and teach them about social communication exchanges (Lamb, 2010).
- Fathers tend to use more "wh-" questions and more requests for clarification than mothers, both of which encourage conversation (Rowe, Cocker, & Pan, 2004).
- Two-year-olds whose fathers use a more varied vocabulary have greater language skills a year later (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006).
- Girls whose fathers read to them are likely to have better verbal skills (Bing, 1963).

Motor development

- Six-month-olds whose fathers are involved in their care score higher on tests of motor development (Gestwicki, 2010).
- Fathers tend to play more one-on-one, rough and tumble games with their children, which encourages large motor development, lets children explore what their bodies can do, and helps them learn to regulate their emotions when engaging in impulsive physical contact (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

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When parent educators share information about how impactful father involvement is, it can help both mothers and fathers become aware of fathers' important role in their children's lives. In addition, parent educators can encourage fathers to practice the behaviors that are most beneficial to positive child development outcomes. For example, by lifting up fathers' strengths in observations of parent-child interaction, parent educators can encourage moms to acknowledge and be supportive of those parental strengths.

Tip from the Field **Absent dads and positive male figures**

Unfortunately, there are a number of reasons a father might be separated from his child. If this should happen, positive male figures can serve as role models and mentors for the child. A competent, caring male figure can nurture and guide a young child effectively and contribute to all areas of the child's development.

Parent educators can encourage the child's mother to consider looking to male role models among immediate and extended family members, colleagues in her workplace, teachers at school, and leaders in places of worship.

They can also encourage absent dads to remain involved even if they are not able to be physically present. For example, a father could record himself reading books for his child.

And, although a father involved early and often is considered best practice, it's never too late for fathers to re-connect and engage with their child.

By William Scott

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William Scott was born in University City, Mo. After the separation of his parents, his mother moved to St. Louis, where he attended the Head Start program and was educated through the St. Louis Public School system.

He continued his education at Fontbonne University, receiving B.A. and M.A. degrees in family and consumer science. While at Fontbonne, William served on the Appeals Committee on Student Affairs and the Young Alumni's Committee, and he received a scholarship from the local chapter of The Greater St. Louis Home Economists in Home and Community. Currently, William works for the National Center for Parents as Teachers as a national trainer and program coordinator, with a special emphasis in working with fathers and Head Start programs.

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Last updated: November 16, 2011

Increasing Low-Income Fathers' Involvement in Home Visiting Programs

By Tomoko Wakabayashi, Karen A. Guskin, Jan Watson, Kate McGilly, and Larry L. Klinger Jr.

Parents as Teachers™

Excerpted from the report *The Parents as Teachers Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Project: Evaluation of "Dads in the Mix," an Exemplary Site* prepared for the Parents as Teachers national office

It is now well-supported and documented that fathers interact with their children in ways different from mothers, contributing equally and importantly to children's healthy and optimal development (Turner, 2009). Father involvement, for example, has been found to positively correlate with children's secure attachment, social and emotional development, cognitive development, and quality of life, including health and poverty (NFI, 2009; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005). Fathers' positive influences in their children's early years also improve children's odds against later incarceration, crime, teen pregnancy, low educational attainment, and substance abuse (NFI, 2009).

What Fathers Are Saying

From the beginning day I really enjoyed our meetings and found myself looking forward to each upcoming Tuesday. The cookout was great. My children really, really had a great time as well.

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Resident fathers, or fathers who live with their children, have been found to be more involved and engaged than non-resident fathers. Nevertheless, the degree of father involvement remains not only qualitatively, but also quantitatively different from that of mothers (NRFC, 2009). There are cultural and societal barriers which associate taking care of children to female roles. Fathers consequently have been found to show less interest in participating in parent education programs and other efforts which support parents to become the first and the best teachers of their children (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 2006).

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Home visiting programs like Parents as Teachers are no exception. While many of these programs have names which suggest that they focus on serving "parents" and/or "families," the participants are overwhelmingly mothers.

Dads in the Mix, a PAT Promoting Responsible Fatherhood program

The PAT Promoting Responsible Fatherhood project was designed to demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of an adaptation of the PAT model with low-income fathers as the primary target population. The project goal was to increase father involvement in PAT services. Residential fathers who met the income criteria (under 200 percent of the federal poverty level) were recruited to participate in a 12-week group meeting cycle lasting three months. Fathers also participated in home visits by PAT-certified home visitors.

One example of a successful program was Dads in the Mix, provided through a PAT partnership with the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU3) in Pittsburgh. Dads in the Mix uses the PAT curriculum *Young Moms, Young Dads* to deliver peer-facilitated fatherhood group meetings and the PAT home visiting curriculum for home visits.

The program's implementation goals were:

1. To expand services to as many fathers in the AIU3 service areas as possible.
2. To recruit at least eight to 10 fathers per session and engage and retain 80 percent of the enrolled fathers so that they receive at least eight hours of skill-based parenting education during their 12-week group meeting cycle.
3. To complete a monthly home visit (three times during the group meeting cycle) with 80 percent of the enrolled fathers.

The program's outcome goal was to have fathers become more involved in the lives of their children.

Implementation and outcome results

The program met its implementation goals. Its successful recruitment and retention strategies focused on:

- Staffing – The program hired experienced and dedicated staff who were knowledgeable about the community, had experience serving fathers, and were certified in the PAT model.
- Coordination of services – Home visits and fatherhood group meetings were coordinated to recruit, engage, and retain fathers.
- Provision of incentives – Dads in the Mix used snacks and monetary incentives like tickets to family-friendly events to engage and retain fathers. However, one of the most effective incentives was the fathers' desire to help their children succeed.
- Flexibility of scheduling – fatherhood group meetings, like home visits, were scheduled at a time that best met the participants' schedules.

- Organizational partnership and collaboration – the AIU3 was able to partner and collaborate with community efforts, including the Father's Collaborative Council. In addition, with the existing capacity and infrastructure of AIU3, fathers were provided with resources beyond what Dads in the Mix provided on its own.
- Communication and outreach – Among the successful strategies were newsletters, personalized event invitations, one-on-one interaction with staff at community meetings and family-friendly events, "each one bring one" campaigns where current participants brought along a friend, and child-drawn invitations to meetings.

Dads in the Mix also showed preliminary evidence for reaching the outcome goal of promoting involved fathers. Fathers reported being more involved in their children's lives and improving communications and relationships with children and/or spouses. In addition to being involved, more fathers reported being patient with their children and others. Fathers' increase in patience was often connected to how they disciplined their children. Fathers' increase in communication as well as patience was also often reported in connection with how they facilitated their children's learning.

As Parents as Teachers continues to evaluate its Responsible Fatherhood project, we will learn more about the successful strategies used by exemplary implementing sites and disseminate the information for use by other PAT model sites to better involve low-income fathers in skill-based parenting education services, and in the lives of their children.

To read the full report, click here.

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Last updated: October 26, 2011

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Life on Mars: Understanding the Culture of Fathers

By J. Michael Hall

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This article was reprinted with permission from the February/March 2008 issue of the National PTA's *OurChildren* magazine.

Don't assume that all fathers are like your own father; each generation offers new perspectives, challenges, and strengths.

In the early 1990s, John Gray wrote a book called *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. I am sure that not everyone agreed with all of John Gray's assertions, but I am sure that from time to time, most of us feel like men and women are from different planets. Those differences sometimes drive us crazy, but it is important to remember that differences can also be strengths.

The differences between men and women make them different as parents. In the past 10 years, schools and organizations like PTA have been more assertive in their efforts to involve fathers. Some programs have been successful, and others have failed miserably. In my experience as a father involvement facilitator, trainer, and speaker, I have found that the programs that work have a solid grasp of these differences and see them as neither positive nor negative.

Treat him like a man

Fathers are men. Men will attend programs, interact, and return for more if a program addresses them as male parents. However, not all men are alike. Not all men like sports or cars. The attempt to make things "manly" instead of masculine leads some PTAs to create programs that are stereotypical and therefore fail to reach all men. Here are some guidelines for creating programs that will attract men.

Make it interactive. Men like programs that are interactive. They want to move and do things. When fathers talk to their children, they typically do so while doing something, such as playing or running errands. Men do not use activities to avoid intimacy; on the contrary, men communicate in a more intimate fashion because they are doing something. Like most fathers, my father did not teach me while sitting in the study having a heart-to-heart discussion. My most memorable life lessons came from my father while driving to and from different tasks. Men not only teach through interactivity, they also learn through interactivity.

Don't assume that all fathers need to be "bribed" with food or prizes; we come for the kids.

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Make it relational. When I train female teachers, principals, and PTA members, they frequently tell me that men don't talk and relate to each other. This is not true. What is true is that men do not talk like women. Men can relate well to other men, but in their way and on their terms. The best way to shut down a group of men is to ask them to talk or share. However, if you ask a man what he thinks or what his concerns are about a certain topic, you usually will have difficulty getting him to stop talking!

Men form strong relationships within their own contexts, such as on the sports field, the battlefield, or at the workplace. The best way to develop men into leaders at school is not through leadership training, but by having them work together on a service project. By sharing the tasks of recruiting, planning, and execution of a project, leaders develop and a close-knit team of men emerges.

Make it relevant. Fathers tend to be pragmatic and want just the facts. PTA meetings can be fairly maddening for men. Instead of hearing the minutes and finance statement read out loud by leadership, men would rather read them silently and get on with the meeting.

Not only do men want the facts, but they also need to know what to do with those facts. If you can't present facts and action items, do not expect men to attend or participate effectively in a meeting.

Give plenty of notice. The main reason that men do not attend programs planned for them is because they were not informed of them at all or in enough time to arrange to be there. Issue a calendar at least a month before the start of the school year so that dads can plan their work schedule, business trips, and other activities to include your programs. Send a "Save the Date" flier out at least one month in advance of any program you hope fathers will attend.

Make it about the kids. Men do not want or need to be "fixed." If you challenge their competency or scold them for not being more involved, they will not be back. However, if you say you want to help dads help their kids, they will be interested. To engage fathers, focus your programs on child outcomes.

Include the kids. Many programs for moms are designed to give them a break from the kids. Fathers tend to have less time with their children, so include children in your programming for men. Fathers want to spend time with their children that is—you guessed it—interactive, relational, and relevant. Scheduling a dads meeting will attract 10 dads at most. Scheduling a father-child breakfast with a meeting after their kids go to class will bring in 10 times that number of dads.

Don't assume that all fathers are not interested. Fathers care deeply about their children and want the best for them.

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An all-inclusive strategy

Don't apologize for including fathers. Your effort to include fathers does not mean that you are placing fathers before mothers. If some of your female members become offended, then they do not get it. Apologizing marginalizes your efforts and the involvement of fathers. Stick to your message.

Don't neglect mothers. Moms have been involved at school for years. If you celebrate every little thing that your dads are doing without also recognizing the steadfast contributions of your moms, you will alienate them. You can enlist the support of moms in providing masculine-based and father-focused programs if you emphasize that PTA is a team dedicated to child welfare and education.

Be flexible in your definition of "father." When you invite fathers, you also need to invite father figures. Almost 5 million grandparents are raising their grandchildren, many children have stepfathers, and some children only have their mother and, hopefully, some male role model in their life, such as an uncle, baseball coach, or clergyman. Stick to your message of father involvement and allow the children to choose to bring their father figure, whoever he may be.

Your father involvement efforts can be very successful. However, if you set your sights too low because you're afraid you can't bring in large numbers of men, then you won't succeed. Expect and plan for success, share your expectations, get all of your members involved in the effort, and fathers will show up.

J. Michael Hall, M.Ed., is the founder and president of Strong Fathers-Strong Families. He's also the father of two boys and has been a special education teacher, a teacher of the gifted and talented, and an intermediate and middle school principal. As an educator, speaker and founder of Strong Fathers-Strong Families, he has presented to more than 60,000 fathers and parents at local schools, Head Starts, and regional and national conferences.

He is presently the host of Strong Father Radio on KYQX and has written magazine articles for the National PTA, The Southwestern Educational Development Laboratory, and The National Head Start Association's Children and Family Magazine. He is also a contributing author to the book on fathering entitled *Why Fathers Count*.

Last updated: November 29, 2011

OFA Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Grant: Summary of Lessons Learned

Parents as Teachers™

By Jan Watson

During the last five years we have had the privilege of partnering with selected Parents as Teachers sites through the Office of Family Assistance Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Grant to enhance father involvement. Ours goals in implementing this grant were to:

- Increase father's participation by scheduling PAT personal visits and group connections at times convenient for fathers.
- Increase fathers' knowledge of child development and the importance of positive involvement in the lives of their children.
- Provide group connections that are targeted for fathers' needs and include skill-based parenting education using a fathering curriculum (*24/7 Dad* or *Young Dads, Young Moms*).

We learned many lessons as partner sites provided group meetings in urban, rural, and military communities that spanned a range of demographics. Our PAT sites experienced a wide array of successes and challenges, sometimes unique to their community. These experiences provide the foundation for this summary of lessons learned, which is organized by category for ease of reading.

Organizational capacity and oversight

- Provide training and resources for staff members to ensure they are informed on the importance of father involvement and have strategies for partnering with fathers.
- Review current services – through the use of surveys, conversations, and other data-gathering tools – to determine if the needs of fathers are being met.
- Identify internal and external barriers to father participation and develop strategies to mitigate or reduce barriers.
- Plan yearly offerings for fathers: Identify start-up dates, times, and locations for groups; offer kick-off events to generate interest; develop a marketing and recruitment plan; and delegate staff responsibilities.
- Develop an action plan (to be reviewed quarterly) that identifies specific goals, strategies to accomplish them, timelines, staff responsibilities, evaluation data, and so on.
- Identify a father leadership committee to involve interested fathers in decisions for future services.
- Develop a survey to elicit fathers' initial and ongoing input, including needs that may arise.
- Include a male advocate to assist with recruiting fathers and facilitating or co-facilitating groups.
- Develop a budget that includes meals, an important incentive for fathers, especially when they come to meetings directly from work.

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Recruitment

- Build relationships on **every** level – with the fathers, with their spouses/partners, with their children, with staff, with stakeholders, and with community agencies that provide similar as well as support services.
- Identify recruitment strategies and considerations specific to your service population.
- Provide specific recruitment events to promote your fatherhood groups (for example, see *Group Connection: The Personal Power of Masculine Readers*) or recruit at community events such as health fairs or books fairs.
- Select a name for your fatherhood group (such as Dads in the Mix or Dads on Duty) with input from fathers. A name is essential for recognition in the community and for marketing, and it can also build buy-in and ownership among group members.
- Select a meeting location that will be convenient and welcoming for the participants.
- Design and distribute "father-friendly" flyers with details of the father group connections, including: name of the group, date and time of the meetings, frequency of meetings, location, incentives, agenda, and contact information for questions. Make it visually appealing with artwork featuring fathers and children (see *Dads in the Mix Program Description Flier* and *Dads on Duty Program Description Flier*).
- Market to fathers about how their child will benefit from father involvement. This reduces the perception that fathers in the group need to be "fixed" because something is wrong with them.
- Consider the recruitment techniques that will be most effective in your community. In rural communities it may work to stop and talk to parents of young children; in urban settings this recruitment strategy was not effective.
- Weigh the potential for success of newsletters, newspaper advertisements or radio spots, e-blasts, and other means of communication.
- Reduce gatekeeping by including mothers/partners in the recruitment process and, if it's culturally relevant, offering a class or activity for them simultaneously when the father group is offered.

What Fathers Are Saying

There's so many people that really make an effort out of their own lives to help others that are less fortunate in parenting skills. So thank you for the support and everything you guys have done for the program.

– I. R., Dads in the Mix, Allegheny Intermediate Unit

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Retention

- Contact fathers between meetings by sending postcards, and call or text the night before as a reminder of the meeting and topic, to ask if they need transportation, and so on.
- Stop by their homes to remind them about the next meeting, drop off an agenda, and ask for their input.
- Take time to build meaningful relationships so fathers know they are important.
- Provide participation incentives based on the fathers' lifestyles and needs. These could include gift cards for gas, oil changes, retail stores, and restaurants.
- Provide resources that are relevant to the needs of fathers.
- Follow through on what you say you will do, whether it is to provide resources, line up transportation, include a requested meeting topic, or attend a court hearing.
- Involve fathers in making decisions such as developing group rules, creating a committee to plan special events, and so on.

Fatherhood group connections

- Select a father-focused curriculum to provide purpose and structure. Make sure it includes topics of interest and relevance to your participants.
- Consider meeting time, day, frequency, and length of group cycle based on the population served. When starting a new group, it is important to meet the needs of a core group of interested dads.
- Research community events, local sports calendars, and culturally relevant dates when deciding on day/days of the week for group connections.
- Be consistent about the meeting dates. This is very important in the establishment of initial core groups.
- Select the location of group meetings carefully, taking into consideration the culture served and how they will view the location, as well as transportation needs.
- Explain the purpose and format at the start of each meeting. Distribute a written agenda or write the agenda on a chart or white board.
- Ensure that facilitators follow the agenda, but show flexibility to meet current needs. This is an important way to show you respect fathers' time.
- Plan for a co-facilitator to assist with responsibilities such as recruitment, greeting fathers when they arrive, completing paperwork, assisting during the meeting, and so on.

Many successes and challenges were experienced during the past five years of this project. To meet challenges in recruiting and retaining fathers, services became more effective and increasingly individualized for each group. Successful strategies were retained and new adaptations were made. Each successive group of fathers brought new challenges as well as a certain comfort level based on past successes.

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The benefits of these lessons learned extend beyond the partner sites implementing these groups and their communities. Evaluations and testimonials have highlighted specific ways fathers, children, and mothers benefit when fathers understand their important role and are involved in positive ways in their children's lives. This is a legacy that lasts far beyond a five-year grant.

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Partnering With Fathers: Techniques for Strengthening Home Visits

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By Neil Tift

Home visits provide a unique opportunity to assess parents' child-rearing skills and to provide targeted services to assist responsible adults in growing healthy families. If you are a home visitor, you are probably already aware of some of the barriers that you must confront when attempting to achieve these goals.

Often one of those barriers is the reluctance of fathers and men in families to recognize the importance of their participation in home visits. This tends to be true across a wide range of cultures, income levels, and educational backgrounds.

In order to engage fathers and men in families more fully, it is important to utilize some simple techniques that tend to enhance father involvement.

Before the visit

- When scheduling your home visit, ask if there are times that both parents are available to meet with you, especially if they live in the same household. Try to schedule the visit to accommodate both of their schedules.
- Identify resources in your community or county that offer programs and services specifically for fathers. These may be located in family resource centers, social service agencies, the YMCA, Head Start, community education, school districts, men's therapists, hospital-based parenting programs, or the office of child support enforcement.
- Locate and bring copies of articles of interest to local fathers. Two great online resources are the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse and All Pro Dads. The articles should focus on helpful tips and positive suggestions, not articles that dump on dads.
- Be aware that men's learning styles and parenting approaches tend to be action-oriented. Fathers tend to use their bodies more, so if you are going to discuss specific skills, consider demonstrating them and then letting the fathers demonstrate them as well. For example, touching or holding the baby or child, moving through space, walking, mixing, arranging, wiping, dressing, and rocking are active methods that are more likely to be effective and to be retained by the men with whom you visit.

During the visit

- Be sensitive to cultural perceptions and gender expectations about you as a female home visitor (if this applies) to visiting a home when only the father is in the household, not the mother.
- When meeting the father for the first time, look at him and shake his hand. Tell him that you are glad he is able to be part of the home visit and that you would like to speak to both of the parents during the visit.
- When seated on couches, stools, chairs, or around a table, try to sit beside the father, not across from him. Many men prefer sideways conversations for their own comfort level. But, obviously, if

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you are female you don't want to sit too close or it could give the wrong impression.

- During your conversations with the family members, try to look at the father and to engage him as often as it seems appropriate. You don't have to focus on 50/50, but try NOT to speak mostly to the mom. If he feels slighted or marginalized, the father probably won't prioritize your next home visit.
- Mention that you have information about resources specifically of interest to fathers and men. These might involve parenting classes, drop-in groups, job fairs or job placement, family law information, co-parenting options, and related guy-type stuff.
- Hand the father the materials (brochures, flyers, schedules, articles, and so on) that are clearly of interest to dads and men.
- Ask the parents if they would each like to have a few minutes of one-to-one time with you to discuss specific concerns or issues.
- Involve fathers in the screening and assessment procedures that you utilize on your visits. Fathers often present a different perspective about the skills and abilities of their children than mothers might provide.
- Try to tune in to the body language of both parents and respond accordingly. Is mom protective of the child? Of the father? Is she jealous of his attention to you? Or of your attention to him? Try to be respectful of both.
- Ask the father open-ended questions about his child-rearing involvement around the home.

When you wrap up the visit, ask the father if he would like any additional resources. Only offer to help if you think you will be able to actually provide them for him.

Stories of Impact

William, age 35, is a stay-at-home father whose son is 2 years old. His wife is in the Navy full time. William found out about Dads on Duty through the Lincoln Military Housing community center in his neighborhood. William expressed relief finding a group for dads, as most opportunities cater to women or moms. The family identifies as low-income and has had CPS involvement in the past. William has a history of substance abuse (meth) but has been clean for several years now.

With an active son, deployed spouse, desire to remain clean, and general anxiety disorder, William frequently spoke of feeling overwhelmed. Through Dads on Duty, William developed friendships with several of the other participating fathers who also happen to live in the same neighborhood. A natural support network was built, and these dads now hang out on a regular basis outside of the groups.

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In addition, William and his son enrolled in the Dads on Duty one-on-one Parents as Teachers in-home services. His son received a developmental screening, and both he and his child regularly meet with a parent educator to practice age-appropriate parent-child interaction and developmental learning. Case management is also provided to discuss topics like stress management and local resources.

William says he now knows the value of "bringing myself physically down to my child's eye level in order to get my message across." And he has incorporated other changes too. "Instead of forcing a meal upon my son," he says, "I now give him choices, and mealtime is less stressful."

Reflection and goal setting have become part of William's everyday life. "Everything I am comes from the upbringing of my parents," he says. "I feel inappropriate parenting exercises were instilled in me. [Through Dads on Duty] I am learning the reasons not to hand down this to my children and the positive skills to be a successful father. I also hope my child takes my faults as a challenge to improve parenting down the family line."

William reports ongoing personal, economic, and family stress. Though his situation has not changed, he is learning how to effectively nurture his son, acquire resources, and reduce stress. Ultimately, this will impact his ability to remain drug free, prevent any future CPS involvement, and be an effective father and spouse.

By Joe Buehrle
SAY San Diego's Healthy Start Military Family Resource Center

Neil Tift is the male involvement coordinator at the Child Crisis Center in Mesa, Ariz. He has served as director of training for three national fatherhood organizations, including the National Practitioners Network for Fathers & Families, the National Fatherhood Initiative, and the Native American Fatherhood and Families Association. Neil was also the founding director of the Fathers Resource Center in Minneapolis from 1990 to 1998. For over 20 years, Neil was adjunct professor of family studies at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minn., teaching ethics, child psychology, and human service administration.

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Recruitment and Retention: Preparing for and Following Through on Group Connections

Parents as Teachers™

By William Scott

Recruitment can be the hardest part of organizing a fatherhood group connection program. If your recruitment and retention efforts are successful, eventually your clients and former participants will make this task easier, but starting from scratch is a challenge.

Putting in legwork before and after group connections is crucial to establishing a successful program. Well-planned events and personalized follow-up can help capture fathers' full attention and keep them engaged.

Preparation

- Start with yourself. Look for trainings in your area on the subject of male or father involvement.
- Take an assessment of your environment or classroom. Are there pictures of men with children? What colors are themes are used?
- Operate on a schedule that is flexible for fathers who work or go to school.
- Survey prospective participants to see what their own interests are and what they want their children to learn.
- Ask dads in your program to help during upcoming group connections. For example, find out where their talents lie, then ask them to come in and demonstrate a "how-to" for the children. Or invite dads to read a favorite book or tell a story.
- Invite participants' children to sing a song or recite a poem at meetings.
- Providing a meal is a good way to attract the whole family, especially dads!

Reaching out

- Get other staff members on board. Ask them to share ideas and receive training on providing opportunities for involving dads.
- Recruit program staff who can relate to fathers, be caring, and gain fathers' trust. Important background requirements include training in working with fathers and an understanding of the importance of fathers. Recruits should be strong role models with the attributes your program is promoting.
- Your staff should have an ample amount of time, flexibility, and resources to recruit. Train them to address any excuse that fathers can come up with for not attending group connections.
- Mothers are a great way to find and involve fathers. Contact the department of social services, schools, or other local organizations that offer programs for mothers and teen mothers. Learn what they offer and share ideas about how your program can connect with theirs. When you speak with mothers, start by explaining how your group will be beneficial to their whole family.

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- Contact agencies who work specifically with men and fathers and ask them for tips and strategies. They may also be willing to talk to their clients about your program. For example, having family support workers recruit in a center-based program adds a trust factor that's very important.
- Get acquainted with probation and parole officers, health clinic workers, school guidance counselors, coaches, and after-school program coordinators. Try to meet with each person individually – this will make a stronger impression than sending them a letter or placing a phone call. Leave them with written information they can pass on to their clients.
- Local celebrities and sports figures are good resources for spreading awareness of your program, as are local television and radio personalities. Don't forget about minor league teams too.
- If you operate in a center-based program, the children are a secret weapon. Have the kids make invitations and give them to their dads personally.
- Don't be disappointed if you only get a few commitments from fathers at first.

At the group connection

- It's OK if you have fewer fathers at your first meeting than you thought you would. Show the same enthusiasm with two fathers as you would have with 20. Your concern should be the fathers who are there, not the ones who aren't.
- Greet the dads (or granddads or uncles) when they hit the door. Invite them to enter the classroom or meeting space and hang out for an extra minute or two.
- Learning to communicate with fathers takes time and practice. Don't start out trying to be someone you are not. Be genuine. You may not be able to relate to the experiences that are shared, but non-judgmental attitudes and understanding are what fathers are looking for from you.
- Providing everything you promised when you were recruiting is very important. The program's credibility could be ruined if you and your staff fail to come through.
- Allow dads to have some ownership of the group connections. Give them opportunities to facilitate meetings, help create the agendas, and discuss special topics of interest to them.
- Encourage fathers to think about and establish personal goals for the next year or two. Have them put these down in writing and include a timeframe and steps for meeting their goals.
- Inform dads about opportunities to volunteer on field trips (if your program is center-based), as well as program advisory boards, local policy councils, or community committees.
- Allow fathers to provide feedback on a regular basis.

Afterward

- A positive response to your first group connection is good. However, that means it's time for the hard work of follow-through to begin. Contact each participant and welcome him to the group.

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- Find out about each father's support system (this will help you reach out to him if he disappears). If a father misses a group connection, get in touch to find out what is going on and offer support.
- Be accepting of those who drop out. When they come back, welcome them. Tell them you have missed them.
- Ask dads to become ambassadors for the program, recruiting and encouraging other dads to engage with it and with their children. This will be natural if your participants are satisfied with the program and believe you have followed through on what you promised when you recruited them.

Remember, there are many ways to recruit and retain dads. Use a variety of strategies and, most importantly, don't give up.

Stories of Impact

David is a loving military father of two children (ages 3 years and 6 months). He cherishes the time he spends with his family, yet there are times when he doesn't know how to handle his emotions. The program has given David the tools to express his emotions in a healthy, comfortable way, thus allowing him to positively engage his children on a more consistent basis.

David really enjoyed an activity we did that showed how unexpressed emotions can hinder one's performance. David mentioned that seeing this and understanding how it affects our relationship with our children has encouraged him to express his emotions effectively. David also noted that talking with his daughter at her level has been an effective tool him helping him create more of an authoritative dialogue rather than being authoritarian.

David is a genuinely nice person who had problems understanding and expressing his emotions. During the early part of the program David's issue with his emotions would cause him to withdraw from the group and from his daughter. Over the course of the program, however, David's ability to understand and express his emotions led to visible changes in his interactions with the group as well as with his daughter.

David is now better able to sustain a calm mood, thus allowing for more positive involvement with his children. David shared, "Not only am I better able to recognize my anger, but I'm also able to help myself calm down."

By Joe Buehrle
SAY San Diego's Healthy Start Military Family Resource Center

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William Scott was born in University City, Mo. After the separation of his parents, his mother moved to St. Louis, where he attended the Head Start program and was educated through the St. Louis Public School system.

He continued his education at Fontbonne University, receiving B.A. and M.A. degrees in family and consumer science. While at Fontbonne, William served on the Appeals Committee on Student Affairs and the Young Alumni's Committee, and he received a scholarship from the local chapter of The Greater St. Louis Home Economists in Home and Community. Currently, William works for the National Center for Parents as Teachers as a national trainer and program coordinator, with a special emphasis in working with fathers and Head Start programs.

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Supporting Non-Residential Fathers: Shedding Biases and Enhancing Effective Parenting Partnerships

Parents as Teachers™

By Zach Allen

There are many predictors of successful fatherhood involvement. One of the key predictors that I found in my work with families was the father's relationship with the children's mother as well as whether the father was a resident or non-resident of the home. Specifically looking at predictors of father involvement, fathers who have a better relationship with the children's mother tend to have more access to their children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Coley & Hernandez, 2006).

During my work, I have noticed that human service agencies are more tailored to mothers. These services are tailored to mothers because historically mothers have been the primary caretakers of the children. It may facilitate more father involvement for agencies working with families to be welcoming and open to fathers whether they reside in the home or not. In fact, as professionals in the human services community, we have a responsibility to take a family systems approach when working with our clients to help better the family.

If human service agencies were more welcoming to fathers and more willing to educate them on child development, some fathers might understand that they can have a positive impact on their children, even if they do not live in the same household. This article will examine some of the things we as human services professionals can do to help involve non-resident fathers and educate them on the importance of their involvement.

As the Oprah Windfrey Show was coming to the end of its 25-year run, one of her guests who stood out was Lance Armstrong, the seven-time Tour de France winner. When he introduced himself, he did not talk about his cycling career but he said, "I am a father of three children." Clearly, he considered his role as a father to be more important than anything else he had achieved in his life.

In my experience in working with non-resident fathers and their families, I have found that it is important to:

- Develop good rapport with the mother and child. Show respect and interest. Listen and hear the parent *and* child.
- Educate the mother on the importance of father involvement. Share why fathers are important for the mother and child, in the future as well as the present.
- Encourage shared parenting between the mother and father. Talk to the mother and father regarding co-parenting strategies for the best interest of the child. This includes inviting both parents to be present during home visits or, if this is not feasible, visiting with each parent separately to share the same information and activities.

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- During home visits (whether they are shared with the mother or not), engage the father while educating him on the importance of his involvement with his children. Make sure to bring along fatherhood-friendly materials that will help with this.
- Encourage positive parenting communication between mother and father. Have a dialogue with both parents regarding appropriate communication while the child is present.
- Encourage accessibility between the father and children. Talk to both parents about consistency, and emphasize that children do well when they know what to expect as far as time with mom and time with dad.
- Encourage responsibility as far as the father meeting the children's needs. Speak with the father about his importance not only being around but providing for his children.

It is also important for you as the parent educator or human service professional to partner with the father in educating him on the importance of his role in parenting his children. It is important to keep in mind:

- Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, and avoid high-risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy, and criminal activity compared to children who have uninvolved fathers (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008).
- Fathers' emotional investment in their children's well-being also appears to be a major factor in children's social-emotional and cognitive development (Cabrera et al., 2000).
- Fathers who had a positive relationship with their own father are more apt to stay involved with their own children. Also, fathers who had an absent father and/or a poor relationship with their own father have an increased risk of having a poor relationship with their own children (Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006).

Whether the father is non-resident or resident, it is important for us as professionals to try to encourage, educate, and engage him to the overall benefits his involvement will bring for his children. As President Obama shared, "The hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill" (Obama, 2009). We as parent educators and human services professionals can always think of new ways we can help fathers fill the vital role that they play in their children's lives.

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Zach Allen, M.A., has worked in the education and human services field for eight-plus years, in a variety of positions. He works at the Collinsville Community Unit School District #10, holding the position of program coordinator for the pre-kindergarten at-risk program as well as the program for children birth to age 3, which utilizes the Parents as Teachers program.

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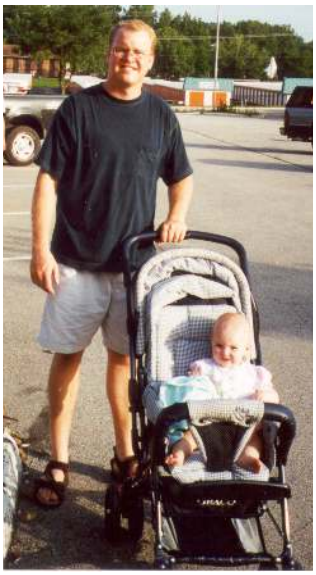
Last updated: November 29, 2011

Working With Fathers in a Rural Community

Parents as Teachers™

By Zach Allen



Located just 30 minutes south of the Illinois state capitol, Springfield, Virden is a small rural community of approximately 3,400 residents. It is a quiet town consisting mainly of small businesses and many small- to medium-size farms. Before the downward spiral of the economy, it was also a mining town. The mine's closure displaced a large number of workers.

During my eight years working in Virden, from 2003 to 2010, the Virden School District – now newly consolidated as North Mac Community #34 – consisted of 96.8 percent Caucasian students with 41 percent of those students coming from low-income households. At the Virden Parent Place, the school district's Parents as Teachers program for children from birth to age 3, I worked with a variety of parents providing case management, crisis intervention, and parent education with their children through home visitations.

After a number of years working with a caseload of 20 families, I began to notice a trend: the lack of fathers present in the homes during my work. I began to question what our district could do to encourage the involvement of more fathers. After pondering this question, all the while doing little to nothing about the issue, I received an e-mail from our Parents as Teachers state leader. The e-mail was sent to all Illinois programs stating that the national center was looking to partner with a local program for a fatherhood initiative project. I jumped on the chance to be involved, and we later were chosen to participate in the fatherhood project.

Being selected was the easy part. I then began to wonder how I was going to get fathers involved in a town consisting of 3,400 people with few resources and a lack of public transportation. The month after we were chosen as one of the participating sites, the national center held a training for all selected programs around the country. The majority of the programs came from larger cities such as Pittsburgh and San Diego … and there I sat from Virden, Ill., wondering, "How I am going to make this program work when these other larger cities have more resources?" With the support of the national center as well as the fatherhood coordinator at that time, Pam Leonard, I was able to think outside of the box and develop some strategies to encourage fatherhood participations in home visits, group connections, and family events.

To make the fatherhood program a success in such a rural area, where small is the norm, it would be important to keep the group size at a maximum of 10 to 12 participants. The goal of the group was to make the participant fathers feel comfortable to share and learn. Prior to each group beginning, I would speak to the fathers about respect and the importance of confidentiality in the group.

The recruitment

The first portion of my thinking revolved around the recruitment of fathers – where was I going to find the fathers and how was I going to convince them that this was worth their time. I started my

recruitment with posting flyers around the community at gas stations, restaurants, the school district, and other locations. I knew I had to go where the dads go, but I also had to do more than post flyers. So I hit the pavement. I showed up at events where the dads would be – for example, dropping off and picking up their children from school and child care. I talked to the fathers about the important role they play in the lives of their children and about their children's development.

As anticipated, some fathers bought into the information and others did not. To increase awareness of the importance of fatherhood involvement, I also talked to school officials and other community leaders. Believe it or not, some of these leaders did not have the best view of fathers due to their own experiences. That was another problem to combat for another day.

The home visits

After getting a few dads involved, I would always schedule a home visit prior to the group connection to talk to them about some parent education or new child development information. These home visits allowed me to have one-on-one time with the father and his children and to answer any questions, concerns, or comments he may have had about any struggle that he or his family may have been facing.

The group connections

The group connections consisted of no more that six to 12 dads. We also provided child care where the workers would provide developmentally appropriate activities for children ages infant through 5. During the group meetings we provided a meal for the fathers and their children.

The topics for the group connections were generated from the *24/7 Dad* curriculum produced by the National Fatherhood Initiative. The opening consisted of an ice breaker that helped the dads build relationships with one another and helped everyone feel more comfortable. The topics for the sessions ranged from dads' family of origin to their involvement with their children to fathering and family roles, to name a few. The first meeting was always the hardest because everyone was so quiet, but as the weeks progressed the fathers started opening up more and more.

Tips from the Field **"Me and My Dad from the Beginning"**

The PAT program at Providence SoundHomeCare and Hospice created three-ring "scrapbooks" which it presented to new fathers.

To make the books, staff members printed out Foundational Curriculum parent handouts relevant to a baby's first year – about key topics like fatherhood, infant feeding, immunizations, child development, books, dental care, toys, bedtime routines, tummy time, crying, nursery rhymes, and more – and interspersed them with blank customizable pages on which fathers could journal, insert photos, or glue mementos from outings and trips. For durability, each page was enclosed in a plastic sheet protector.

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In the words of one staff member, the books were kid-oriented, colorful, and "simple but fun."

The program's staff surveyed fathers about their parenting knowledge when the books were presented and again after several months. They also tracked how many of the customizable pages fathers had completed. As a result, the books told the story of the baby's and the father's first year.

Information provided by Mary Brown and Jennifer A. Martin
Providence SoundHomeCare and Hospice
Olympia, Wash.

Lessons learned

To help ease the burden to the fathers who lacked transportation, we started offering transportation to and from the group connections. To keep the fathers coming, we were able to offer incentives such as food, gas cards, and other modest items.

As the group leader and parent educator, I had to keep encouraging the fathers through some difficult times. Some of the group members were struggling with unemployment or relationship issues with their child's mother, and a few struggled with crime involvement.

Setting the foundation of respect and confidentiality made the fathers feel comfortable and, in turn, made the groups a success. In addition, utilizing a research-based curriculum as well as providing weekly home visits a day or two before the group connections kept fathers engaged. Providing a meal for participants and their children also contributed to the groups' success.

Zach Allen, M.A., has worked in the education and human services field for eight-plus years, holding a variety of positions. He works at the Collinsville Community Unit School District #10, holding the position of program coordinator for the pre-kindergarten at-risk program as well as the program for children birth to age 3, which utilizes the Parents as Teachers program.

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