

Father Involvement

*Prepared by Dr. Glen Palm,
Associate Professor, Child and
Family Studies, St. Cloud
State University, St. Cloud,
MN*

Three approaches to further involvement in parent & family education

Psychoeducation

Parent education with father-child interaction

Couples communication

Different Paths to Father Involvement

The proliferation of family education programs for fathers during the 1980s (e.g., Klinman and Kohl, 1984) was a very positive sign for advocates of increased father involvement in childrearing and family life. The grass roots nature of this movement has limited the amount of published information about program formats and evaluation efforts. A recent symposium at the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting (Roberts, 1992) brought the author in contact with a number of colleagues who have begun to systematically design and evaluate programs for fathers. The focus of this report is to describe and compare three different approaches to increasing father involvement. This analysis should be helpful in suggesting how each of these programs might be implemented or adapted with different target groups.

The first approach, a psychoeducational program developed by Levant (1988) has the basic goal of teaching fathers specific communication skills. These skills are taught to fathers in a series of 8 weekly sessions to fathers of 6-12 year olds. Fathers learn from short lectures introducing skills, observation of the skills in role plays and practicing skills using a video feedback format. Fathers also have a workbook to assist them in learning basic communication strategies and in generalizing them to their family life. The assumption is that fathers need specific training in communication skills to assist them in becoming competent and involved parents. The unique aspects of this program are the focus on men and adapting a format for parent skills training that is familiar and comfortable for males.

The second approach is a family education program format developed by McBride (1990) and Palm (1992). The goal of this approach is to assist fathers of young children (2-5) in learning more about themselves as fathers and promoting a close father-child relationship. These goals are addressed in a unique format that brings father and child together for the first hour of a two hour session. The parent-child interaction time is an opportunity for fathers to play with their child in a developmentally appropriate environment without the typical distractions of daily life. The format for the second part of the weekly sessions involves fathers in group discussion around a variety of topics including child development, discipline, changing role of father, communication and balancing work and family time. During discussion time fathers engage in a variety of activities including debriefing observation of parent-child time, mini-lecture, pencil and paper exercises and group discussion. (See Palm and Johnson, 1992 for more details.) The fathers learn about development, communication and discipline techniques in these programs from the modeling of the instructor and other fathers and from their own one-on-one experiences with their child. An important assumption in this approach is that men are motivated to develop a close relationship with their young child and are best able to do this in a supportive environment with other men where there is a balance of interaction with their child and discussion with other men. Greater father involvement is seen as an essential step in taking on a more equitable share of family responsibility.

The third model, couples communication, focuses on the couple relationship. This model is best exemplified by the pilot work of Hawkins and Roberts (1992). Cowan and Cowan (1987) also used a couples format in their intervention project with parents during the transition to parenthood. A basic assumption of this approach is that the couple forms the foundation of the healthy family

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—G.P.

and that communication and negotiating skills are essential to equity in the family setting. The basic goals of this program are to establish more equitable division of labor in the home by increasing communication and negotiating skills for both mothers and fathers. The 8 week format is similar to the other programs that have been described. A unique feature of the Hawkins and Roberts model is that the couples complete a contract that addresses the sharing of household tasks. The couples format is seen as the natural setting for teaching gender sensitive communication and negotiation skills. The parent-child relationship is assumed to be affected in a positive way by giving the couple skills that they can use to effectively communicate with their children.

Table 1 provides a quick overview and comparison of the three program models. One clear difference is in the assumptions about family change. These differences may reflect a focus on different target groups in different stages of the family life cycle. The different assumptions suggest very different paths to the same general goals of intimacy and family equity. There are also some clear differences in target groups and methods. For example, each program provides different strategies and opportunities for learning communication skills. The goals are also very different on the surface, yet they all promote greater involvement of fathers in family tasks. This comparison outlines very different conceptual models that should be evaluated more carefully to validate both the methods and assumptions. The programs all involve at least two professionals working with the target group for about the same period of time so that program costs may be very similar.

There appear to be many different paths to supporting fathers in their changing family roles. Two important goals that are shared by the programs reviewed are developing an awareness of equity in family responsibility and developing emotional intimacy in the father-child relationship. The development of a variety of approaches is healthy in that different family systems, different individual needs, and different points in the family life cycle demand different approaches. It is an exciting time to be working with fathers and all of the programs reviewed provide opportunities for men to grow into a new father role that helps to balance and define equity in the family and gives fathers and children the support to connect on a deeper emotional level.

As we move into the future there are a number of important questions that need to be addressed to improve services for fathers and families.

- How to create practical strategies for identifying individual needs and matching fathers to programs.
- How to develop effective yet flexible curriculum materials to match changing and diverse needs and family settings.
- How to evaluate different models and methods to determine which are the most effective and what are the short and long-term impacts on fathers, mothers, children and families.

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Table 1: Program Comparison

	Psycho-Educational	Family Education	Couples Communication
1. Target Groups	Fathers of 6-12 year olds	Father and Child (ages 2-5)	Couples with young children
2. Goals	Communication skills for father Assist fathers in new family roles	Father-Child emotional intimacy Assist men in learning about selves as fathers Increase father's family responsibility	Equitable division of family tasks More effective couple communication Decrease marital conflict
3. Family Change Assumptions	Change in Communication skills and empathy will create better father-child relationships	Fathers learn from and with young children. Close father-child relationship will lead to father taking more family responsibility	Couples form the foundation of family systems. Equity in families starts with clear communication between couples. Family responsibility for fathers comes from clear and direct negotiation and communication.
4. Program Length	8 weeks	10 weeks	6-8 weeks
5. Program Methods	Mini-lecture, Role Plays, Video Feedback, Workbook	Father-Child Interact'n, Mini-lecture, Exercises, Group Process	Mini-lecture, Role Plays, Group Process, Contract Writing
6. Service Provider	Counseling Psych.	Parent Educator Early Childhood Ed.	Psychologist Family Counselor