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Working with Fathers...

Home Alone Dads

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***Working with Fathers:
Methods and Perspectives.***

“Most men detest the notion that they are ‘babysitting’ during their solo parenting stints, but many are uncertain about what exactly their role is and should be during these times.”

The topic of “*Home Alone*” dads has emerged as a popular one among fathers of young children. The “home alone” image of terror when the young boy in the movie realized that he has been forgotten by his parents has some similarities to men who suddenly find themselves home alone with their children. It is not terror that strikes men, but anxiety about being alone and making the most of this time without the support of their spouse.

Most men detest the notion that they are “babysitting” during their solo parenting stints, but many are uncertain about what exactly their role is and should be during these times. Is it a time to play with the children? Is it a special time because dad is home? Or, is it a time to maintain the regular routine of family life? Is it a time for work on household repairs? Mothers also have their ideas about how men should be spending these times and sharing not only child care responsibilities but also household tasks. The uncertainty about the dad’s role during these times can lead to family conflict and self-doubt.

When I first began to work with fathers in the late 1970s, one of the activities we did was to spend a weekend together at a cabin with our young children. It was a great time and I remember remarking at the end of one weekend that the cabin had never been so clean. This comment initiated jokes among the men and about the male inability to see dirt. The clean cabin and a weekend spent caring for young children without major catastrophes were both signs that male deficits in cleanliness and ability to care for young children were only myths. The weekend experience gave some of the men the self-confidence that they could parent on their own.

Reflecting back on these experiences, it was also true that some of the men were feeling the need to overcompensate for these perceived deficiencies to prove their fatherhood. In some ways it was an easy test, the excitement of being in the woods, the camaraderie and support of other dads and the routine of making meals and cleaning up made this an exciting yet safe adventure for the men and children. The biggest challenge was to get all of the children to sleep in a new and exciting environment. The men went home tired but proud and more confident in their parenting.

Family life has changed in the last 15 years and more men are spending regular periods of time caring for their children at home. Yet the deficit model continues to lurk beneath the subconsciousness of men raising doubts about their ability to manage this time alone with children. When women and men have different expectations about these times (He=fun with the kids while mom is away, She=caring for the kids and protecting the house from the chaos that children sometimes create), conflicts can arise and doubts about male capabilities to parent can be re-stimulated. Men seem to be asking for both ideas on how to spend this time as well as support. Sometimes wives support their husbands by organizing this time and men fill in as assistant parents (Palm & Palkovitz, 1988).



Home Alone Dads Lesson Plan

Part I. Where does a deficit model of fathers come from?

Part II. Sharing Experiences about Solo Parenting

The men I work with seem to want support to move towards a more equal sharing of child rearing responsibilities. It is important to help dads of young children to approach this home alone time in a positive and constructive manner. It is an opportunity for men to learn more about building a close relationship and taking responsibility for children. It is also the reality for many fathers in the 1990s and they need support to move beyond the babysitter or assistant parent role. The lesson plan described below focuses on understanding doubts, sharing concerns and building on strengths that men bring to the role of co-parent. The plan ends with practical tips for managing home alone time and the ambiguity of parent and child needs.

Introduction: Ask each dad in the group to describe a typical week and the times that they spend alone with their children. This provides a quick way to learn about the work/family patterns in the group. The following list of outcomes can serve as a brief overview of the session.

Learner Outcomes

- Fathers will examine media images of men parenting alone and understand the deficit model of male parenting.
- Fathers will share stories and concerns about parenting alone as a way to build understanding and support.
- Fathers will identify skills that they as male parents bring to parenting alone.
- Fathers will become aware of strategies for being a home alone dad.

This topic can be introduced by looking at a few video clips of fathers in TV roles. Situation comedies (Dail, 1985) during prime time frequently portray fathers as incompetent. This humor is based on the stereotype of men as insensitive, naive and incapable parents. A discussion of the humor and messages about men help to introduce the topic of a deficit model. Some of the discussion questions help dads to think about the images that may constrain their behavior and expectations of those around them.

Discussion Questions

- Why are these scenarios funny?
- What are the negative characteristics that these clips portray?
Positive characteristics?
- What are the messages about men as parents?
- What effect does the media have on men who are trying to be co-parents?

Ask fathers to tell about a "bad dad day" when they were alone and there were problems (the children made a mess, someone got hurt or was sick). The purpose of sharing these stories is to acknowledge that we all have days when we feel inadequate as parents. It also allows the dads to see some of the humor in these events and begin to see how and what we can learn from these experiences. It might be easier for men to share these stories in pairs if there is a large group.

Fathers, con't.

Sharing Experiences: Discussion Questions

Part III. Strengths Men Bring to Parenting

- Has anyone had a "bad dad day" where you were with kids by yourself and things were awful? (give some examples)
- Why are these experiences hard for us?
- What do we learn from these experiences?
- What makes it easier to get through these times?

This section can focus on the strengths that men bring to parenting. It may help to give a couple examples such as humor and problem-solving. It is important to make the connections of strengths to male socialization and acknowledge that both men and women can exhibit these strengths. It is not the purpose to create or reinforce sex-role stereotypes, but to help men to see the positive parts of male socialization that can be helpful to the parenting role.

As a large group, brainstorm and record a list of strengths that men bring to parenting.

Part IV. Strategies for Solo Parenting

This is a time to create a list of practical tips for dads to bring home. It becomes a time to reflect on the lessons learned from experiences and ideas generated by the discussion of the day. The suggestions in the handout "**Tips for Home Alone Dads**" (M&M p. 13) summarizes a list created by a group of fathers. The list reinforces the idea that men are capable and have tips to share with each other. I like to write down the ideas, add a few of my own and make this a handout to share during the next session.

Summary

The summary time provides an opportunity to review different themes and points that were made in the session. Some of the themes that may come up are listed below and could be mentioned.

- Home alone time is a positive opportunity to build a closer relationship with children.
 - It is important to balance needs of children with own expectations.
 - Develop a support system to call in case of emergency or just to have fun together.
 - Fathers build confidence by doing.
 - Beware of trying to overcompensate for the deficit model.
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References:

Dail, P.W. (1985). *What do parents observe about parenting from prime time TV?* **Family Relations**, 34 (4), 491-99.

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Tips for Home Alone Dads



- **Have minimal expectations for the day — don't expect to get too much done.**
- **Take a break from each other with a nap or movie.**
- **Be sensitive to children's pace and give them some sense of control.**
- **Spend some time doing what the kids want to do.**
- **Get over playing neatly. Messes are okay.**

- **Spend some time cleaning up together.**
- **Share some care with a neighbor.**
- **Remind yourself that childhood is brief and won't last forever.**
- **When children are demanding time, be clear with them about when and what you will do with them. (e.g., In ten minutes we can go out and play.)**



- **Help children clean up instead of getting into a battle.**
- **Make a plan for the day with your child so that you can both decide what will be fun.**
- **Have a positive outlook.**
- **Pace yourself to get through the day.**
- **Find a support system...someone to do things with or call if you need to talk to someone.**
- **Have realistic expectations about what you can accomplish and how children might help.**



Source: Glen Palm, Ph.D., St. Cloud State University. January, 1995.
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