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Working with Fathers...

Future of Fatherhood: The "Next Steps"

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During the last three months I have led several workshops in Minnesota around the topic of *Understanding Male Involvement in Parent Education*. The basic purpose of these sessions was to encourage programs to expand their services to more diverse groups for fathers. The Early Childhood Family Education programs in Minnesota have always served some men through generic parent education classes. Many programs have also offered father-only classes. The typical participants in these classes are well-educated, motivated, older, middle-class fathers (Palm & Palkovitz, 1988). The purpose of this article is to explore some practical strategies for assisting programs to take the next steps towards serving all fathers.

A brief profile of three fathers outlines some of the individuals and new situations that family educators may face as they reach out beyond the "nurturant, involved father." At this next level men may be confused and in some pain as they struggle to live up to the new images and higher expectations for fathers. Many fathers care about their children, but are often unable to express this caring in concrete ways that family members understand.

Dave is a young father (26 years old) with two boys ages 4 and 7. Dave is currently in prison in the middle of a 3-year sentence. He writes his children on a regular basis and keeps contact through his sister. He is worried about his children because their mother has a drug problem.

Jesse is a 23-year-old father of 2 children, a three-year-old son and a 5-year-old daughter. He has recently begun taking Adult Basic Education classes. He would like to complete a GED program. He is not sure about jobs or careers but wants to spend more time with his children.

Mark is a 36-year-old divorced father of 3-year-old Jennifer. He currently travels 500 miles to visit Jennifer one time a month. He has limited visitation time and is concerned about maintaining a good relationship with his daughter.

There are a few programs that serve target populations of fathers such as teen/young dads in urban areas. The group of individuals outlined above represent a diverse group of fathers that could exist in any community in the 1990s. The basic assumptions of this article are that all men want to be good dads and that most men have limited opportunities for parent education and support. This article will address some of the obstacles that programs may face in changing the focus and level of attempts to reach a more diverse and needy group of fathers. The article will also outline a pilot program and describe some concrete steps a program can take towards serving a more diverse group of fathers.



Awareness of Program Barriers

There were a number of different obstacles that programs may have to overcome to take the "next steps" towards reaching out to fathers.

1. Staff concerns about harm to single mothers and children.

Often programs are reluctant to reach out to more fathers because single parent mothers and their children may feel uncomfortable and left out. Outreach to fathers must be sensitive to these feelings and not blame mothers because a child's father is absent or uninvolved. More aggressive outreach to fathers should be accompanied by support to mothers and children to address feelings of loss that may be related to a father's absence. Male responsibility towards "fatherless" children should be stressed in a supportive not punitive manner.

2. Staff sense of complacency.

Often programs feel that because the motivated, involved fathers are attending that they are already doing enough outreach to men. It can be helpful to do an assessment of fathers who are not coming to find out some reasons why men in a community are not taking advantage of parent education and support services. (Johnson & Palm, 1992).

3. Father-only groups promote sex role stereotypes.

There is a fear that if segregated groups for fathers are encouraged that the principles on inclusion and non-biased education will be compromised. It is important for family education to acknowledge some of the gender differences that may keep men away. These differences may call for a variety of service formats to serve both mothers and fathers. Affirmative action for fathers in family education may be necessary to be inclusive and to work towards equal participation of both genders in family education.

4. Serving fathers is not cost-effective.

The cost-efficiency of serving the most parents is also used to question new initiatives towards fathers. For example, a program that is funded to serve mothers and/or generic parents might attract 15 parents while the same program for fathers might only attract 5 fathers. There can be a pay-off to this kind of investment as a new component for fathers is established and the program begins to build a reputation that they care about fathers and expect them to be involved.

5. There are few male family educators.

Another area that continues to be an obstacle is the lack of male parent and family educators. In Minnesota this is a barrier because a parent educator license is required to teach in Early Childhood Family Education programs. Fewer than 5% of the parent educators are males. There are attempts to recruit men but the field typically employs people part-time and few men want to get a license to work part-time. There may be men around in various related fields that are interested in family education and could be used as guest speakers or teachers for groups of men. Recruiting more men to work in parent and family education makes sense as a long term strategy.

6. Lack of a knowledge base and resources.

The other barrier to reaching out to a broader group of fathers who may have more intense needs is lack of resources. There are few curriculums for fathers that have been published over the last 10 years. It appears that many of the programs for fathers (see Klinman and Kohl, 1984) are grass roots efforts with minimal funding (McBride & Palm, 1992). Curriculum development has been a low priority in these settings. The growing research literature and number of popular books for fathers will provide some resources but information for use in programs is still very limited.

The Dad's Project: A Pilot Program

A model of a new initiative that has been developed in St. Cloud is outlined below. The Dad's Project is built on the strengths of a program that has four male teachers who have worked together on a fathers-only program on Saturday mornings for the last 3-4 years. The group was ready to expand services to a more diverse group of fathers. This group was supported by an administrator who both understands and values this initiative. Table 1 provides an overview of the services that the Dad's Project offers.

Outline of Dad's Project 1994-95

Purpose: To move beyond Super Saturday Program offering to meet needs of more diverse group of men/fathers in the school district.

Activities:

1. Super Saturday Classes — This class provides father-child activities and parent discussion opportunities to dads of young children (ages 2-5) every other Saturday from October through May. The program has been in operation for the last 10 years and serves 40-50 families a year.

2. Dads & Kids Night Out — This program uses a Super Saturday format but targets services for families enrolled in Even Start Family Literacy or Learning Readiness programs. These programs serve families with young children where some risk factors have been identified. The program meets three evenings during the school year to supplement other parent education activities.

3. Parenting Class at St. Cloud Correctional Facility — A needs assessment process included focus groups with 30 fathers and individual interviews with 12 men. A parenting class was designed for 12 weeks and conducted with a group of 12 fathers of young children.

4. A session called "Raising Boys in the 1990s" was presented to parents of 4-5-year-old children who are participating in a 25-week parent education program. The Super Saturday staff served as "Guest Teachers" at 12-13 sessions of 8-12 parents.

5. A Parenting as a Couple Group— This group was designed as an all day workshop for families with young children. It included family time and parent time in discussion.

6. Initial Design and Development of "Daddy Kits" as a concept for reaching first time fathers. Two grant proposals were developed to fund this idea.

This set of activities was developed based on the staff's perception of needs and gaps in services that the program provided. The activities also build on the basic Saturday program format...which is a strength. The Dads and Kids Night Out sessions were targeted towards programs that served families that had some risk factors. The parent class at the correctional facility was done with some initial needs assessment with the male inmates before embarking on a program. This allowed more time to develop a sense of trust and to identify relevant parenting issues. Other components also built on previous work and were integrated in ongoing programs. The Dad's Project provides a concrete example of taking some next steps towards serving more fathers.

Summary

The challenge to all family education programs is to begin to take the "next steps" towards more services for all fathers. There are a few important guidelines that can be gleaned from the experience of the Dad's Project. First, build new efforts for fathers on program strengths. Also, remember that needs assessment efforts can be used as a non-threatening way to begin family education services for fathers. Try to integrate father services with other components so that they can complement rather than compete with each other. Finally, start small and take a few initial steps that have a high probability of success. These "next steps" begin to encompass a larger circle of fathers and carry the message that all fathers deserve and can benefit from parent education and support.

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