

Bringing a Fatherhood Program Plan to Life

Overview

It is essential to understand fathers' significant role in the healthy development of children from birth and beyond. Traditional mother-child service programs will need to ensure that all staff can anticipate and address the hurdles they may encounter in work with fathers.

A child with a loving, engaged mother and father has an incredible start in life! Always, that is the goal.

Lesson Learned: Some Things to Remember When Working with Fathers

- ✓ Fathers are essential contributors to the healthy development of their children during pregnancy, birth, and beyond.
- ✓ Fathers are also very diverse in their roles as fathers and partners with those who care for their children.
- ✓ Fathers may parent in very different ways than mothers, and possibly other than program staff have experienced fathers in their own lives.

✓ Traditional mother-child-focused service providers are well-trained and accustomed to building trusting relationships with mothers. However, working with fathers may be less familiar.

- ✓ Fathers share some of the same general strengths and needs as mothers in parenting their children and have others specific to them.
- ✓ It is essential to acknowledge the significant role fathers can play in their children's lives and how they contribute good things to their children simply by being a positively involved and engaged parent.

- ✓ Fathers may be looking for guidance to understanding their children and the various stages of their growth and set reasonable, healthy, and age-appropriate goals for them.
- ✓ Many fathers have these skills, but others may need help. Program staff might need to assist fathers in setting goals for their own lives and creating plans of action to help meet those goals.
- ✓ Fathers also need help negotiating conflict with their child's mother and building a better, more cooperative relationship.

✓ When a father wants to share his problems, program staff needs to recognize this for what it is. Such sharing means a father trusts and respects program staff and that staff has reached a critical stage of progress. Be sure to listen closely to the father. Possibly, all he needs is for someone to listen.

✓ As a father talks, program staff needs to appreciate his strengths and help him recognize what he is already accomplishing in his situation and how to overcome the barriers (real and perceived) ahead.

Enlist Full Staff Support

- The fatherhood coordinator and family service workers play a lead role in work with fathers, but they cannot make the fatherhood program a success by themselves.
- Success will come only when the entire staff sees
 itself in helping fathers as part of helping children.
 Initiating and maintaining active father
 involvement must be everyone's work, from the
 director to the receptionist.

Enlist Full Staff Support

- Lead by agency administration, the fatherhood program must be prioritized and given clear and regular support. The director, and other leaders, must incorporate the fatherhood program, including all its activities and components, into the program's overall plan.
- Father involvement, as part of the family engagement effort, must become an
 integral part of the program's mission. Accomplishing this may require training and
 a shift in thinking among all agency staff about its constituency and mission. Father
 involvement cannot be merely a "tag-on" or "trophy project" of a few in the
 program.
- With the help of agency leadership, assure that all front-line staff becomes familiar with and appreciate the expanded mission the fatherhood program requires.

Enlist Full Staff Support

Caseworkers and home visitors play a critical role because they are most often in close contact with parents. They can include fathers in projects and meetings as a matter of routine. They can make an effort to get to know the children's fathers, learn about them, address them by name and in their native language, and, whenever possible, keep the family workers, and fatherhood coordinator informed.

Enlist Full Staff Support

The agency's receptionist is vital to the overall environment and plays a unique entry-point role for fathers. The receptionist is usually the first point of contact for those interested in the program by phone and in person. In too many instances, this key staffer is not seen as a central player in the fatherhood program mission. **Be sure the receptionist** receives appropriate training and realizes the importance of the fatherhood program, the reasons for this new direction, and how they can contribute. The receptionist also must convey a **father-friendly attitude**, warmly recognizing fathers by name as they enter the agency.

Enlist Full Staff Support

All agency staff can be an effective communication channel for fathers who may be initially uncomfortable with the **program.** Agency staff can serve as strategic contact points and program recruiters. Some staff may need training in building rapport with both mothers and fathers to tell them **about relevant program services.** They, too, can pass on helpful information they collect about fathers to family and fatherhood coordinators. The goal is for all agency staff to work as a team. If perceived as the pet project of only a few, most likely, the program will not be as successful as it could be.

Requirement #2:
Be Aware of the Mother/Father Relationship

Be aware of the relationship a father shares with his child's mother. The relationship between a mother and father is the emotional foundation of the child's world. If this relationship is strong, the child has a solid **emotional foundation.** If this relationship is troubled, the dynamic stability of the child may be affected. Make sure program or community resources are available to help fathers and mothers develop vital, healthy relationship skills. No one is born with mature adult relationship skills. Fortunately, there are many relationship-building education training programs available in communities, and they continue to grow.

Requirement #2: Be Aware of the Mother/Father Relationship The relationship between parents plays a significant role in how they participate in the program. If there is conflict, one parent may restrict the other's access to the program and even bias staff against the other parent. Program staff can easily fall into an alliance with one parent who is uncomfortable with the other without recognizing that. Moreover, program staff should become well aware of any legal challenges to father involvement in the child's life and any prior adverse behavior, neglect, or abuse.

Supervision and reflection with other staff can help to manage some of these potential challenges.

Requirement #2:
Be Aware of the Mother/Father Relationship

Fatherhood Coordinators or other appropriate program staff can help fathers with relationship problems either one-on-one or in mutually agreed upon peer group **settings.** Program staff may also address some of these couple issues either at the agency or during home visits. Suppose couples show a desire to be together. In that case, it is critical to support the relationship with encouragement and when asked for advice, education, and access to services that could help them acquire the tools and skills to navigate human relationships, whether they are intimate or not.

Requirement #2:
Be Aware of the Mother/Father Relationship

For parents who desire to build their relationship and home upon marriage, program staff should refer them to resources, if these are available in the community, to help them achieve their goals. At the same time, staff should be aware of their reactions to unmarried parents. Their attitudes and beliefs can present barriers to participation.

Requirement #3: Enhancing Cultural Competence and Openness

It is essential to learn about fathers in the community. Gaining competence in working with diverse groups can be achieved by listening to them and the leaders in the community who work with fathers. These include community-based organizations, religious leaders, grassroots activists, concerned citizens, employers, and community sports coordinators.

There must be an attitude of openness toward members of the community at large.

Questions To Be Answered:

Do they feel welcomed by staff?

Do they sense that staff is comfortable around them?

Familiarity with a group often drives openness. Lack of openness can simply be the result of being unfamiliar with a diverse group. The openness of center staff will likely grow as competence expands. There are three critical steps to gaining cultural competence:

Requirement #3:
Enhancing
Cultural
Competence and
Openness

L. Seek knowledge of the different cultures represented in the community.

Learn as much as possible about the ethos, the characteristics, history, values, belief systems, ideals, and behaviors of men from these various groups. Incorporate as many cultural factors into the program as possible, giving it a flavor and comfort to fathers in the community.

Requirement #3:
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Program staff should work to transform cultural knowledge into cultural awareness. Try to understand the world from the point of view of fathers. (This is as important with gender as well as with cultural differences!)

Requirement #3: **Enhance** Your Cultural Competence and **Openness**

Develop and display cultural sensitivity. Acknowledge that cultural differences exist and seek ways to bridge them without erasing them. Whenever possible, leverage cultural presentations. Make sure program materials are appropriate for diverse populations and that they foster good communication and education.

Requirement #3:
Enhance Your Cultural Competence and Openness

Openness is rooted in the beliefs of the program staff themselves. The program staff brings their ideas and understandings about children and parents to their work with fathers. Including feelings about fathers' roles from their upbringing might consist of judgments about discipline, nurturance, and even sleeping arrangements. Decisions about 'right' or 'wrong' childrearing practices often come from those beliefs. In working with fathers, staff may need to assess and reflect on their own opinions as they understand the fathers in the program.

Requirement #3:
Enhance Your Cultural Competence and Openness

In the effort to seek cultural competence and openness, also remember that group identity is not everything. Each person is affected by group identity to varying degrees yet not defined by it. Fathers are individuals and desire to be recognized as such. A person may share many of the beliefs, attitudes, and attributes of a particular group or possess very few. Get to know the various groups represented in the community but, most importantly, get to know the fathers as individuals.

Requirement
#4:
Make
Evaluation A
Priority:
Measure
Success Step
by Step

In the planning process, a fatherhood program must have a good handle on the evaluation process. If measurable outcomes have been formulated, and the program design is based on these outcomes. Such a beginning gives actual, targeted results to measure program progress. Fatherhood program staff would do well to develop a program logic model to outline program strategies, activities, resources, and outcome metrics, to help define the father involvement process and the probable outcomes.

Requirement #4: Make Evaluation A Priority: Measure Success Step by Step As the program unfolds, document your work. Would you please keep track of the following: successes, how they develop, challenges and opportunities, steps toward progress, and overall, what has been learned through this process?



Requirement #4: Make Evaluation A Priority: Measure Success Step by Step

- Implement a data collection system to monitor and track your work with fathers.
- Keep lists of what has been learned about fathers in the community served.
- Track and document staff training and development around father involvement.
- Document how the program reaches out to fathers and builds and sustains new relationships.
- List the needs, special and otherwise, of fathers in the community. Explain the plan for working with them to meet those needs.



Requirement #4: Make Evaluation A Priority : Measure Success Step by Step

- At the beginning of father groups, keep a log of each session, who attended, what the session covered, and the input gained from participating fathers.
- Make sure to help staff become sponges for even the most minor indicators of success with fathers, share these success stories at weekly staff meetings, and record them for evaluation.
- Document how your father engagement program unfolds as you expected and how it goes differently than planned. Keep track of unexpected challenges. This critical information will help you understand your successes and your failures later on.



Requirement #4: Make Evaluation A Priority: Measure Success Step by Step

Be forward-thinking. By being forward-thinking, evaluation is critical to the ongoing life of the fatherhood program—will be more straightforward and provide more valuable results. One practical approach is to simply organize all the beautiful data the agency is in the habit of collecting and measure that against targeted outcomes.



Requirement #5: Plan for Constant Improvement

- whether they are on track with their goals and determine when they are ready to set more ambitious ones.
- The "dot.com" business culture developed a phrase—"the agile company"—to describe an organization that constantly monitors its ability to succeed and can make changes quickly to ensure success. Be one of these organizations that make needed adjustments fast. Some might involve significant changes. Most will be minor adjustments. It is important to remember that the need to make adjustments to a plan throughout the year is not an indication of poor planning. Instead, this is a sign of sensitivity to the needs and interests of all families and assurance that nothing—even the original plan—interferes with successfully welcoming their strengths and meeting their needs.



Requirement #5: Plan for Constant Improvement

Below are some approaches that have been used to incorporate ongoing monitoring of both the program plan and its implementation:

- Conduct quarterly program audits to ensure that data on fathers are routinely collected and analyzed.
- Create and use brief, easy-to-use forms to gather feedback from participants on services, speakers, training, classes, and other program activities.
- At the end of meetings, classes, and activities, informally ask participants
 how they liked the experience and improved it. After receiving their
 feedback, record their comments and then discuss how to incorporate this
 information.
- Individual families review the partnership every quarter to make sure their goals are being met.



Requirement #5: Plan for Constant Improvement

- Record their progress and agreements on ways to improve problem areas.
- Regularly review results from automated systems, such as the Responsible Fatherhood Management Information System, ensure that outcomes are linked to practical program activities.
 Use your program logic model to guide your efforts.
- Share the results of your assessment efforts with your program staff and community partners for feedback.



Requirement #5: Plan for Constant Improvement

In conducting ongoing monitoring and assessment, it is critical to assign one staff member to maintain this assessment and reporting. This person must possess a sense of ownership of the program and appreciate the importance of ongoing evaluation.

Regular, continuous assessment serves the same function as the dials on a car dashboard, which give constant feedback on the vital operations of the automobile to ensure arrival at the driver's destination. Ignoring them could create big problems. This essential task of monitoring the center's "dashboard" assures a program will arrive at its desired destination.



A centerpiece of father involvement work is fathers' groups. Here fathers come together to interact with their peers, develop trust, build relationships, and begin to share openly and learn from one another.

There are many ways to conduct these groups. Most fatherhood programs offer fathers a parenting discussion group, a peer support group, or some combination of the two. Groups may be open-ended and ongoing or choose to set a very definite schedule each week. Some are more free-flowing in style, responding to what fathers want to discuss. Typically, groups work best with some sound thought-out direction and structure, especially in the first few months of formation. Whether a group considers it essential to set clear group rules and guidelines or deal with issues as they arise, a wise approach for all father discussion groups is to anticipate and address some cases from the outset.



Requirement #6: Conducting Successful Peer/Discussion Groups

From the start, be clear about the purpose of the group activity and the goals to be accomplished. Identify expected outcomes. Plan and think carefully and creatively about how to achieve the group's goals.



Requirement #6: Conducting Successful Peer/Discussion Groups

Make sure to hold father groups at a place that:

- Meets the real, practical needs of fathers;
- Makes fathers feel welcome; and
- Ensures that everyone feels comfortable about participating



Requirement #6: Conducting Successful Peer/Discussion Groups

The best curricula in the world are not sufficient to run a successful fatherhood support group. What is essential is leading an exciting and engaging discussion group that can set and achieve its goals and thus be successful.



Requirement #6: Conducting Successful Peer/Discussion Groups

Many groups are not as successful as they could be because the leader lacks the necessary skills. Some of the most common problems include:

- Lack of preparation or purpose;
- Lack of understanding of the needs of the group;
- Excessive lecturing;
- Inadequate direction (the group ends up being only a "rap session");
 and
- Inability to tame overactive participants and comfortably involve the quieter participants.

Requirement #6: Conducting Successful Peer/Discussion Groups Facilitating a successful group may look easy but is truly a specialized skill. Program staff needs training before setting out to enable fatherhood groups.



Another primary staple of a successful fatherhood program will be creative father-child activities. What are some practical ways to engage fathers with their children?

Be sure to schedule father-child activities regularly. The best investment is time spent thinking of creative, exciting things fathers can do with their children. Father-child lunches or dinners, especially those with themes, are a good start. But more is needed. Arrange situations and interactions where fathers can help their children enjoy new experiences and develop new skills. The fact that their fathers were there when they experienced these new activities will stay in each child's mind for a lifetime.



Below are some ideas for fathers that can be incorporated into a father engagement program, divided by age-appropriateness. It is not a list of instructions. Instead, it includes ideas built into conversations with fathers about care and play with their children. It is important to remember that our work with fathers should not be done in a top-down manner but rather in partnership with the men themselves and in support of what they already do well. We do as much for fathers when we spark their discovery of their ideas than when we give them ours.

Activities fathers can do with infants and toddlers:

- Babies love to be held close to their father's chest. Keeping a baby close and rocking her helps the baby to feel secure. Develop physical experiences.
- Babies also love to be lifted and gently tickled by daddy. It can be thrilling for them, and they also learn, as daddy holds them safely, that daddy is there to take care of them. They know trust and security.
- Talk to your baby. Father's voice is different from mother's and children can detect the difference from the earliest weeks. They learn to trust you by hearing your voice. Name objects that you and your child encounter. This helps your child learn the connection between names and things. Develop verbal experiences.

• Sing favorite songs to your child. Your baby loves to hear familiar songs over and over again.

Make up your memorable songs. (Teach fathers good, creative themes and how they can make up they're own unique to their child.) Young children enjoy songs with motions and finger-plays.

- Babies are fascinated by faces. Make sure that yours is very expressive when you interact with your child. Let them touch your face as you make funny faces. Create activities that involve real "face-to-face" interaction.
- Say "I love you" and "I am proud of you" often! Let your child, from earliest days; know why they are unique to you. Encourage dads never to stop doing this. Create activities that help you find ways to say "I love you," and or "I am proud of you," realizing that the best way is just to say it.!"



- Babies love to watch you and mimic what you are doing. Get down on the floor with them and do some funny movements. Encourage them to copy you.
- Talk to your baby as you go outside for walks. Point to things and name them. Talk about what you see in your neighborhood. (Give fathers creative ideas for doing this...and the opportunity!)
- Let your child see you interacting with other children and adults. This builds confidence in interacting with others.

Read! One of the most important things you can do with your child, even when you bring her home from the hospital, is to read to her. Put your child in your lap and cuddle her. Choose simple hard-board books with bright pictures. Point out objects and name them. Tell what is happening in the story. You are also getting them comfortable with books. Children will learn instinctively that books are an enriching part of their lives. As your child gets closer to one year of age, they will start developing language skills, and reading is one of the best ways to promote this. (Make sure the program incorporates father/child book time.)

Requirement #7:
Ideas for Build Child-Awareness in Fathers

 Reading to, cuddling, and talking to your child are three of the most essential activities to do with your infant and toddler to stimulate healthy development.



Activities fathers can do with two-to-three-year-olds:

Provide a safe place where your child can play and run. Take your child outside as much as possible to run in the yard or park.
 Encourage them to jump, climb and roll down hills in ways appropriate for their age. Encourage children to push limits, BUT in healthy, reasonable ways. This builds confidence and sound judgment in taking likely risks in life. (Incorporate this kind of outside, physical play in the program.)

Requirement #7: Ideas for Build Child-Awareness in Fathers

- Read to your child every day. Read books, magazines, and signs you see on the street. Help your child learn that reading is a normal and natural part of life. Even fathers who are not strong readers can make up stories to go along with pictures. The essential experiences are closeness, hearing language, and seeing that words correspond to pictures and make a story.
- Play ball with your child. Teach them to catch, throw and kick a ball in age-appropriate ways. This teaches coordination, and it's fun to play with Dad. This can be worked into organized outside playtime.



Help your child learn to use the potty. Help them understand that everyone makes mistakes when they are potty training. Never punish a child for an accident. (Helping fathers be better helpers in this area can be done in small group sessions.)

Continue saying, "I love you." (Find creative ways to help fathers understand why they are unique.)

Encourage your child to ask questions. Answer them with short, simple answers. Father/child groups can encourage such questioning interaction.

Requirement #7: Ideas for Build Child-Awareness in Fathers

- Teach your child what words are acceptable and which are not when they are heard.
- Teach your child that being kind, gracious, and honest are some of the most essential things in the world. Let children know what you expect and why. Let children know what they should strive to live up to. (A father peer group is an excellent place to stimulate thinking about proper expectations for children. Allow fathers to communicate these expectations to their children.)



- Create small, silly or fun secrets with your child. Have a special place that just you two like and no one else knows about. Share a secret handshake or joke. This private sharing builds a strong bond between father and child and makes the child feel unique and vital.
- Participate in the child's favorite activities, whether splashing in puddles, drawing with crayons, playing dress-up, or examining bugs on the ground.