

**Getting Started:
Involving Fathers
in Early Childhood
Family Education**

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InfoSheet: ECFE

The Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) Program in Minnesota is “an example of what every state should be doing.” This, according to a report released by the Carnegie Corporation, entitled *Years of Promise: A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for American Children*. The ECFE program, offered through or in conjunction with most school districts or community education offices, is based on the idea that family provides the first and most significant learning environment and parents are a child’s first and most important teachers.

An ECFE environment that openly welcomes fathers is as challenging to create as it is to fill with dads. The obstacles programs face getting fathers to register for classes coincides with the reluctance fathers have about registering for these same classes. However, with many of the obstacles facing a father’s participation in an early childhood class, simple solutions can help your program create a more father-friendly environment.

Frequent and open communication with fathers in any early-childhood program is crucial to its success.

Developing Father-Friendly Environments

Prior to beginning any father-related program, it is important to know exactly how fathers want to be involved in their child’s early childhood program. A needs assessment, like the samples shown in the book *Fathers and Early Childhood Programs* by Glen Palm and Jay Fagan, can be very useful at identifying what fathers want or need. There is an art to assessing fathers’ needs. Fathers may not be familiar with program services and may not be aware of their needs. It is recommended that needs assessment be an ongoing process that includes building trust and providing a comfortable environment for fathers to learn about possible topics and services.

Frequent and open communication with fathers in any early-childhood program is crucial to its success, so long as it doesn’t appear condescending. When appropriate, it should be initiated by staff members to open the door to a constructive, two-way dialogue. This will help fathers feel at ease in an environment that can feel rather daunting if they are new to this type of experience. It can be advantageous to know ahead of time if fathers are usually there during class itself, at drop-off time or even pick-up time so staff members can plan to be available to initiate the dialogue.

It is also crucial that program staff are aware of fathers and father figures who are connected to families. Families in the twenty-first century are as varied as ever, with the possibility of step-fathers, biological fathers,

grandfathers, or other father-figures involved in a child's life. It is important to determine the level of involvement of each male.

Making Dads Feel Comfortable

If your program is in the process of creating a new fathers-only class, here are a few additional suggestions to consider to increase your chances for developing a successful program.

The physical setting is vital to the success of any father class. Schools, churches, health clubs and community centers often offer a 'father-friendly' environment for classes. A conference room conducive to adult learning works well for fathers; although there does need to be a degree of caution when using a regular school classroom. Memories of school may not be fond, thus causing fathers to be less than excited to participate. It is important to note that something as simple as pictures on the wall or reading materials can affect the comfort level for fathers. These items should include positive portrayals of fathers and their children. A changing table in the men's restroom is another sign that the program expects men to be involved in their children's lives.

ECFE programs need to be able to accommodate family schedules by offering classes at night or even on the weekends. Fathers are more likely to attend classes at these times.

Fathers may be reluctant to commit to a long term class schedule (10 - 20 weeks) so it may be beneficial to begin any fathers' program with a bi-weekly class that meets 4 – 6 times. Another alternative would be to offer a drop-in type format, with fathers attending when the topic pertains to their needs.

Yet another option would be to offer a one time event that provides information to fathers as well as recruiting fathers that may be looking for more in-depth classes. One way to ensure fathers will show up would be to arrange a well-known local personality as a guest speaker. Dad and Me activity groups are also a great way for fathers to have quality time with their children without a long-term commitment. These groups center on a single theme like 'Gym Night' or 'All about tools' and usually last one to two hours. They may be scheduled once per month and offer a way to welcome men into the program environment and can open the door for participating in other program activities.

Resources for Early Educators

A Booklist for Reading with Dad, a list of quality children's picture books featuring fathers. Available from the Minnesota Humanities Commission by calling toll-free 866-268-7293 ext 263 or by email at famlit@minnesotahumanities.org.

Early Childhood Family Education, Minnesota Department of Education. Information about ECFE is available on the state's website: http://education.state.mn.us/html/intro_fam_ed.htm.

Fathers and Early Childhood Programs, 2004, Glen Palm and Jay Fagan. Limited copies of this book are available by contacting MFFN at (612) 787-4091 or pmasiarchin@mnfathers.org.

Parenting Education Resources, University of Minnesota Extension Service. A variety of resources for parents and educators is available online at www.parenting.umn.edu.

Understanding Fathering: The Early Head Start Study of Fathers of Newborns, 2003, Mathematica Policy Research, www.mathematica-mpr.com/PDFs/ehsnewborns.pdf.

Years of Promise: A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America's Children, 1996, Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades. Visit www.carnegie.org to view the executive summary and to find ordering information.

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