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NRFC Tips for Fatherhood Professionals

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ENGAGING FATHERS IN HEAD START

Since 1965, the guiding principle of Head Start has been to ensure every child enters school physically, emotionally, and intellectually prepared to begin formal learning. In the program's inaugural year, Head Start provided services to 561,000 children. Currently, Head Start provides services to more than 900,000 children each year, building on its legacy of having served more than 22 million children.

Head Start is a family-focused program that helps mothers and fathers understand and appreciate the vital and unique roles they play in their children's healthy development. Nevertheless, over the years, the majority of Head Start parent involvement has been by mothers, not because fathers have been excluded, but often because societal factors have placed mothers in the primary role of nurturing early childhood development.

However, in the last two decades, this trend has begun a reversal and, like many family-based community programs, Head Start is making significant efforts to recruit and engage fathers in their children's social, emotional, physical, and educational development. Like other family-based programs, Head Start has found that substantial time and effort are required to reverse old stereotypes about the importance of father involvement in children's early development. Real and perceived barriers to father involvement need to be overcome in order to successfully engage fathers.

Barriers to Change

J. Michael Hall, executive director of Strong Fathers, Strong Families, is a national leader in encouraging fathers to be involved in schools. His experience reveals that:

- Fathers fear exposing their inadequacies
- Fathers sense the ambivalence of program staff members about father involvement
- Fathers face a "gatekeeper" mentality by mothers and female staff
- Programs are designed for a mother's parenting style, not a father's style
- Fathers fear being "hammered" by staff and mothers in the program
- Most programs do not know a father's strengths, so fathers do not expose those strengths
- Fathers do not need more drama in their lives because they often already have enough

In a recent study entitled, "Reaching Out to Fathers," Stephen Green, assistant professor of child development at Texas A & M University, described the barriers: "Despite recent efforts to involve fathers, some fathers hesitate to participate in their child's early care arrangements. Possible barriers to involvement include teacher and staff attitudes toward father involvement, mothers' attitudes toward father involvement, societal views concerning male involvement in child care, family/cultural beliefs, fathers' educational level, irregular work schedules, and lack of knowledge on the part of fathers of how to become involved."

In what should be a multi-year endeavor, Head Start programs need to address these barriers as they plan and implement father involvement initiatives. In their publication, "Father/Male Involvement in Early Childhood Programs," Brent McBride and Thomas Rane cautioned, "As with any other initiative, early childhood educators must proceed slowly in their efforts to encourage male involvement in their programs. The key to success for these efforts is building a male-friendly environment that facilitates a

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

culture of male involvement in the program. However, building such a culture is a long-term process, and educators shouldn't expect too much too soon. They should start slowly and build upon their success."

Building and integrating a culture of male involvement that benefits children can take time, patience, and persistence. Head Start programs should not expect significant changes in the first year or two. Begin by assessing your program's strengths and challenges, and then develop strategies that enable you to enhance your program and increase its impact.

Assess Strengths and Challenges

Assessing existing strengths and challenges requires asking tough questions to examine attitudes, beliefs, and expectations, as well as programming, procedures, and facility management. You likely will have additional questions that touch on the unique aspects of your program, but you might start with:

- How does your organization currently work to include fathers and father figures in the lives of the children in the program?
- Does your organization communicate equally with mothers and fathers concerning their children?
- Is your organization's staff trained in the different strengths of mothers and fathers and co-parenting roles?
- Does your organization diligently seek to develop leadership in both mothers and fathers in your program?
- Does your organization purposely manage facilities and program goals to continually be father-friendly?
- Has your organization set timely, measurable outcomes for your father involvement efforts?
- Has your organization developed interesting, interactive, and relational activities for fathers and children?
- Do staff members in your organization have unresolved issues with the father of their children that may affect their attitudes toward father involvement?
- Do staff members in your organization have unresolved issues with their own father that may affect their attitudes toward father involvement?
- Do the mothers of children receiving services from your organization understand the importance of and support increased father involvement?

Because you are working toward cultural change, input about these key questions should come from diverse individuals and groups such as:

- Current and former parents in your program
- Bus/van drivers and assistants
- Current and former volunteers
- Custodial and dietary staff
- Teachers and teacher aides
- Caseworkers and home visitors
- Nurses/health care workers
- Administrators and their staff
- Current and former board members
- Funding organizations
- Collaborative organizations; Intermediate Units and school districts

With feedback from various audiences, you will have a better understanding of how to address the main barriers to fostering father involvement. You also will gain a more thorough perspective on the strengths of fathers that can be recognized and reinforced. You will discover:

- Fathers care deeply about their children
- Fathers will attend the right programs
- Fathers will share insights and concerns
- Fathers are ready to take action
- Fathers (more than 60 percent of them) interact regularly with their children
- Fathers have a strong desire for their children to succeed
- Fathers have distinct and important strengths to offer
- Programs that strengthen fathers strengthen children

Now you can develop a strategic plan with realistic timeframes and expectations for creating a father-friendly environment. As you begin formulating your strategic plan, consider the following:

- Craft 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year plans
- Address the entire organizational culture (top to bottom)
- Outline programming features, regardless of funding
- Align opportunities for father involvement with your program activities calendar
- Rely on existing resources and keep it simple
- Ask fathers for input
- Compile a database of no-cost and low-cost resources
- Learn about promising practices and network with representatives of successful programs at conferences and meetings

Implementing Change

Because individuals and organizations react to change differently, institute change slowly and allow ample time to process and alleviate fears and suspicions. Some promising steps to try:

- Communicate and gain feedback from EVERYONE. Change is easier when people are kept informed and believe their input matters.
- Train EVERYBODY. Everyone in your organization, including mothers, will be affected by a change to a father involvement culture.
- Focus training on child outcomes, and then develop programming toward improving child outcomes through the increased involvement of fathers and other males.
- Allow champions to evolve. As you communicate, recruit, and provide training, champions will emerge and energize the efforts. Developing a database of resources will enable these individuals to help incorporate male involvement into daily program activities.
- Keep support a priority and address personal and professional issues promptly.
- Communicate with fathers often, particularly fathers who do not live with their children.
- Remember mothers. Communicate with, gain input from, and bring mothers in to support the program and promote the goal of positive child outcomes. Offering training for mothers is an important part of the process. Just as many fathers do not understand how vital they are to their children's development, many mothers also do not appreciate how vital the role of fathers is.

Recommended training for mothers might include:

- The Positive Effect of Father Involvement in Child Development
- Understanding the Differences in Parenting Styles of Mothers and Fathers
- Developing Parent Leadership Within an Organization
- Ways to Engage Fathers in Their Children's Education and Development

Programming for Father Involvement

As you communicate, educate, gain input, give feedback, and provide training and support, a father involvement culture will emerge. The next step will be to design and develop programming that engages fathers, maximizes the strengths associated with their parenting style, and increases their participation in your organization

The following practices can boost the impact of your programming:

- Make sure enrollment forms and event signup sheets have specific places for fathers to add their contact information and signature.
- Fathers should be invited AS FATHERS (not “parents” or “families”). Send information, letters, and invitations specifically addressed to the fathers.
- Respect fathers’ work hours by scheduling programs and events at various times during the day (early morning, lunchtime, after school, or evening). Be flexible, but schedule only as many events as you can handle with the staff and resources you have.
- Invite fathers to parent-teacher meetings.
- Get the word out early (at least a month in advance) about upcoming events and remind fathers often.
- Have the children do the recruiting. Enthusiastic children will seek out their fathers and convince them to participate.
- Fathers want to be involved in programs that are relevant. So let them know how a particular activity helps their children’s development and how they can use the new information with their children at home.
- Fathers want to help children develop skills and resiliency, so design programs that teaches them how. Inviting fathers to read in the classroom, talk to the children in the program about their jobs or hobbies, participate in field trips, and lead educational demonstrations are just some of the ways fathers can share their skills and abilities.
- Encourage fathers to help in organizational development by participating in planning and implementing special events, interactive reading and classroom activities, parent advisory boards, and organization leadership.

Conclusion

Fathers contribute to their child’s development when they are actively and positively involved in their lives. Developing a father/male involvement culture within your program with the goal of positive child outcomes is possible and beneficial to your organization. The initial investment of time, energy, and planning is challenging, but rewarding in the end. Research shows that building stronger home-school partnerships will help children achieve success as they progress through the educational system. This has been the goal of Head Start since its inception and the outlook is promising.