

info sheet 18



Talking with Moms about Engaging Dads

Mothers play a central role in how fathers are involved with their children. They can facilitate or hinder the father's involvement, based on their inclusion or exclusion of the father in childrearing, parenting time, and other opportunities for father engagement. The nature and extent of gatekeeping plays an important part in the coparenting relationship between parents. (For more on maternal gatekeeping, see MFFN Infosheet 17.)

For fathers, the single most powerful predictor of fathers' engagement with their children is the quality of the men's relationship with the child's mother, regardless of whether the couple is married, divorced, separated or never married.¹ In some instances, fathers' commitment to their children only holds *when mothers also believe the father's role is important.*²

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This infosheet is intended to help professionals engage mothers to engage the fathers of their children in healthy ways. It focuses on the active role professionals can take in talking with mothers about fathers and includes suggestions on the language we use to talk about fathers. The focus here on the mother's role in father involvement is not intended to diminish the father's responsibility to participate in the child's upbringing. Nor are we suggesting that professionals limit attempts to engage fathers directly. Here, we are recognizing that professionals who work with mothers have a great opportunity to change the level of father involvement through their work with mothers.

How to Talk About the Importance of Fathers with Mothers

The following suggestions provide ideas for talking with moms about engaging dads.

Start with the premise that most parents want the best outcomes for their child. Think of positive father involvement as another resource in your

toolbox for mothers to improve outcomes for the child, just like vaccinations are an investment for protecting the child's long-term health. You may not actually see it working, but it does.



Conversation Tip. Ask: "If you knew of a resource for your child that would help their development, improve their chances of success in life, and provide additional financial support for your child over their lifetime, would you want to get that resource for your child?" "Even if it involved some work on your part?"

Recognize that what mothers and fathers do—their role in the family—has changed over time. No longer are fathers just "bread-winners" – they are also caregivers for children. No longer are mothers required or expected to stay at home and raise kids – many also have jobs or careers of their own. This means that today's fathers provide a wider variety of roles for children than many fathers of the past. This also means that it is harder for mothers to know what they do that is special or different from fathers, if roles are more interchangeable. Some mothers may feel threatened by fathers' more active involvement or fear that it will bring more conflict, over parenting styles, for example. These are natural reactions that can be addressed.



Conversation Tip. Ask: "Do you think that the role of fathers in caring for children has changed in the last two generations? In an ideal world, what kind of role do you want the child's father to play? What kinds of activities would you want the father involved in?"

Provide information on how fathers matter to children – whether they are involved or not. Fathers' presence or absence has an impact on children. We no longer need to ask: Do fathers matter to children? Research has clearly answered, yes.

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Tips for Professionals:
How to talk with mom about engaging dad

See also MFFN info sheet 17: Gatekeeping: Mom as a pathway to healthy father involvement

Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

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Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.

Positive father involvement is good for children. When fathers are positively involved, children have enhanced social skills, better problem solving abilities and increased academic performance,³ among other good outcomes. Conversely, when fathers aren't involved or are negatively involved, children are at risk for a host of difficulties in these same areas. Fathers, by their very nature, tend to promote benefits for children in ways different than mothers. (For more details, see page 3, *"My kid doesn't need him. I can raise him just fine by myself."*)

Fathers also positively impact child wellbeing by providing financial support for the child, which can make a big long-term difference. Declines in income following divorce—regardless of the initial income level—were found to account for as much as half of the higher risk of children dropping out of high school, for girls becoming a teen mother, and for boys being idle (out of work) for children now living in single-parent families.⁴ Inadequate parental guidance and attention and the lack of ties to community resources accounted for most of the remaining disadvantage in this research. This often happens due to a weakened connection between the father and child when they are not living together. Keeping fathers involved can help keep children connected to important community resources, including the paternal family. Last, children get part of their identity from the dad. If he is not involved, children may assume something is wrong with them – that they are not worthy of his love or time.



Practice Tip: Talking with mothers about the importance of fathers takes practice. Take some time to focus on the benefits of father involvement that matter most for the mothers you serve and hone your own personal message. MFFN's

Infosheet 3: Positive Father Involvement is a good place to start. The more comfortable you are and the more authentically you can deliver the message, the more mothers will believe you.

Let mothers know that fathers may not know how important they are to their child and that they can be an important messenger for this information. While mothers overwhelmingly (93 percent) feel they are irreplaceable in a child's life,⁵ over 50 percent of fathers feel they can be replaced, either by the mother or by another father figure.⁶ If the mother doesn't treat his role as important, what message does this send to the father and child? As indicated earlier, mothers' beliefs about the fathering role are influential in determining whether or not fathers act on their own feelings about being an involved parent.

Remind mothers that they have a role in the father's involvement. Whether they live together or apart, mothers play a key role in facilitating or hindering the father's involvement. Part of their job as a mother is to make the father's impact the best it can be, just like a mother wants to optimize the child's health and safety. (To illustrate the point, think of what would happen if the parents don't live together and the father had custody of the child. Would the mom want the dad to do all that he can so she can have the best possible on-going relationship with the child?) Maternal encouragement—going beyond telling him of his

importance but also using encouraging behavior and words—can help booster father involvement in the right situations. Research shows that a combination of a supportive coparenting relationship and an encouraging partner tends to lead to involved, competent fathering.⁷

Establishing a good coparenting relationship between the mother and father is important for father involvement—it may be the best thing the mother can do—and can make facilitating father involvement easier. (If the parents agree, for example, on discipline procedures for the child, the mom may be less hesitant about how much time the child spends with the dad.)

Establishing a good coparenting relationship may be the best thing a mother can do to facilitate father involvement.

Also make your own role an active one.

There will be some situations in which the father presents such a risk to the mother or child that the best scenario may be no father involvement. As professionals working with the mother or family, consider what threshold we use to determine when to separate a mother from a child. Is it the same for fathers?

With mothers, you can emphasize that there are resources to address concerns

about the children's safety with the father or his parenting competency. Mothers can help fathers become involved in services, such as parenting classes, by bringing them to the class and/or participating in initial sessions (as allowed). This has been shown to increase the probability that fathers would participate.⁸ With safety concerns, mothers should promote the least restrictive father involvement that is in the child's best interest. These situations may call for the assistance of additional professionals or services.

Sometimes mothers restrict father involvement for reasons not related to safety. They may be mad at him for having a new girlfriend or baby, for example. These are the situations in which it is important to focus on the child's best interests, and you, as the professional working with the mother, can help.

And then, recognize that it isn't easy. Parenting may be one of the hardest but most important jobs a mother has in her lifetime. At the same time, getting along with and facilitating the father's involvement may sometimes feel just as hard, especially if the parents don't live together. Encourage father involvement for the sake of the child – because we know the importance of fathers to children. Father involvement also provides broader benefits to fathers themselves, mothers, and the community as a whole. (See MFFN Infosheet 12: Key Messages for Healthy Fatherhood Discourse.)

Sometimes we too easily assume that an uninvolved father is not interested in his child or is incapable of parenting. In the next section we provide suggested responses to common reasons a mother might give for limiting a father's involvement.

Mom's Concerns About Dad – And Possible Responses that Consider Dad's Point of View

Professionals may follow-up on these responses with proactive strategies and resources for the mother (to address her own lingering concerns) or resources that a mother may share with the father (for example, a parenting class for fathers). For a list of fatherhood resources, see the fathers' resource directory at www.mnfathers.org. In addition, www.wecanparenttogether.org has resources for coparenting.

Mother says: He's not interested in his child.

Response: Most fathers, just like most mothers, are interested in being involved in raising their children. For example, research in the US with unmarried parents found that 99 percent of fathers interviewed around the birth of the child want to be involved in raising their child.⁹ Men and women are similarly predisposed emotionally to nurture their children in ordinary circumstances, but they are not similarly prepared or supported by society in doing so.¹⁰ There are many reasons a father may look disinterested, when in fact he is interested, such as apprehension or fear of not knowing how to care for a young child. Given the right support, most fathers are interested and want to be involved. And the desire to feel emotionally connected to one's children throughout life is the same for men and women, though it may be expressed differently.¹¹

Response: While many kids turn out okay being raised by one parent, research shows that children that grow up absent a father-figure are at increased risk for problems at school, teen pregnancy, lower academic achievement, and delinquency.¹² On the other hand, children of highly involved fathers tend to have better friendships, fewer behavioral problems, better educational outcomes, greater capacity for empathy, non-traditional attitudes to earning/childcare, higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower criminality and substance abuse problems.¹³ Fathers help children develop skills and competence in sometimes different ways than mothers. For example, fathers tend to provide more rough and tumble play and less immediate support when a young child gets frustrated, which promotes children's problem-solving abilities.¹⁴

Mother says: My kid doesn't need him. I can raise him just fine by myself.

Response: No parent is born with all the skills necessary to parent a child. Fathers are often at a disadvantage when it comes to taking care of children because they are not socialized like girls to take care of younger children. Further, fathers typically have less time with children to practice their skills (particularly if the mother does more care at birth and the father is working), and they have fewer networks of support built around caring for children. But given time and support,

Mother says: He doesn't know what to do with his child. (Or: He can't handle his child alone.)

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most fathers do just fine. How the mother behaves towards the father also matters. The mother can find father-friendly help, such as fathers' parenting classes.

Response: Children sometimes have difficulty transitioning from one parent or caregiver to the next. This is influenced by a variety of factors, such as the child's age and temperament, the circumstances of the transition (Are the parents hostile to each other? Is the transition during the child's nap time?), and how familiar the child is with the parent or caregiver. In most situations, children calm down after the transition and enjoy themselves. We often can't judge how the child did during their time with the other parent or caregiver simply on the basis of the transitions. It may help to change the parenting schedule and how the child is transitioned. If this is an on-going problem, more professional help may be needed.

Mother says: When I leave him with his father, he cries and is unhappy.

Response: No two people parent alike. It is inevitable that parents will disagree over minor aspects of parenting. But it is best if parents are on the same page about major aspects of parenting, such as discipline, bed-time routines, etc. And of course it is important that both parents provide a safe and loving environment. Sometimes a professional can help figure out what a mother doesn't like about the father's parenting and whether those differences will negatively impact the child's well-being. Help to get on the same page about parenting together is another useful strategy. A parenting plan is one way to seek compromise and to get on the same page. Learn more here: www.wecanparenttogether.org.

Mother says: I don't like the way he parents.

Response: Inconsistency like this can be very frustrating for the parent and potentially damaging to the child. Consider whether a change in the parenting schedule would improve the father's timeliness (maybe his work schedule prohibits him from picking up the child at a certain time). The services of a supervised visitation center for exchanges may help in setting specific expectations, help the father understand how his behavior impacts the child, and may find a resolution that meets the needs of the family. See www.svnetwork.net.

Mother says: I let him see his kid, but he is always late or sometimes doesn't show up. His inconsistency is too hard on me and our child.

Response: Most fathers, like most mothers, want to be good parents. And some fathers, just like some mothers, are involved in activities or behaviors that aren't good for themselves or their kids. Just like kids aren't trying to be "bad" when they are uncooperative, most parents who are struggling with issues of chemical dependency, mental illness or other issues are not trying to be a "bad parent." There are

Mother says: He's a bad father, a good for nothing.

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services that may help, whether it is chemical dependency or another problem. There are often safe ways to have the father involved. See www.wecanparenttogether.org for suggestions.

Mother says: He doesn't pay me any child support. Why should he get to see his kid?

Response: Although it is often hard to separate these issues, non-payment of child support should not be used as a reason to stop a parent from seeing a child (and it is illegal in Minnesota). Stopping parenting time can have detrimental effects on the child. Definitely, fathers should be financially responsible, and there are resources to address the non-payment of child support. But taking it out on the child by denying access to the father isn't usually good for the child. And it often helps motivate a father to pay support if he can see his child regularly.

Mother says: My child says he/she doesn't want to see him.

Response: What is the reason the child says this? We all know that children say lots of things that they don't really mean. (Just think of children that say out of anger that they hate their parents—they may feel that way at a particular moment but it isn't usually lasting.) Children may say they don't want to see a parent for many reasons. It could be that a child doesn't like the

dad's new wife, or for reasons that are more concerning. Generally, children should not be given the responsibility of deciding whether or not they get to see a parent. That places too much responsibility on a child and is the role of the parents. Help the mother figure out what is underlying the child's reasons and find resources to address it.

Mother says: I want him involved, but I can't get him interested.

Response: Sometimes fathers don't know how important they are to their children, and our society doesn't always treat them as important. A father may be motivated to be involved through resources such as the Dads and Daughters Togetherness Guide or Being a New Dad (available at www.TheDadMan.com). He may be motivated if he spends time with other fathers in a supportive environment. The paternal grandparents may be another resource in connecting him with his child.

Conclusion

Your work with mothers to foster father involvement is of great importance. See our website for more resources, and let us know of your successes and what works for you!

Contribute now

MFFN is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Donations are tax deductible to the extent allowable by law. Donate online at www.mnfathers.org or call for details at (651) 222-7432. Thank you.

- Philip A. Cowan, Carolyn P. Cowan, Nancy Cohen, Marsha K. Pruett, and Kyle Pruett. Supporting fathers' engagement with their kids. In Jill D. Berrick and Neil Gilbert (Eds.), *Raising Children: Emerging needs, modern risks, and social responses* (pp. 44-80). New York: Oxford University Press (2008).
- See MFFN Infosheet 17: Gatekeeping: Mom as a pathway to healthy father involvement.
- Kyle Pruett. *Fatherhood: Why Father Care Is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*, pp. 35-57. New York: Free Press (2000).
- Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur. *Growing up with a Single Parent: What hurts, what helps*, p. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1994).
- Mothers' Council, Martha Farrell Erickson and Enola G. Aird, Co-authors, *The Motherhood Study: Fresh insights on mothers' attitudes and concerns* (May 2005). Online at: <http://www.motherhoodproject.org>.
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- See, for example, the California Supporting Father Involvement study, discussed in Philip A. Cowan, Carolyn P. Cowan, Marsha K. Pruett, Kyle Pruett and Jessie J. Wong. Promoting Fathers' Engagement With Children: Preventive Interventions for Low-Income Families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 71 (August 2009): 663-679.
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- Id.
- Sarah Allen and Kerry Daly, University of Guelph, for the Father Involvement Research Alliance. *The Effects of Father Involvement, An Updated Research Summary of the Evidence*, p. 8-11. (May 2007). Online at: http://www.fira.ca/cms/documents/29/Effects_of_Father_Involvement.pdf
- Fatherhood Institute (UK), *Invisible Fathers: working with young dads—a resource pack*, p. 12., available from www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.
- Pruett, *Fatherhood*, p. 42.

For a more comprehensive review of the research on the impact of father involvement, see the research in cite 12 and research summaries from the Fatherhood Institute (UK) online at: www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.

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