

Supporting Non-Residential Fathers: Shedding Biases and Enhancing Effective Parenting Partnerships

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Parents as Teachers™

There are many predictors of successful fatherhood involvement. One of the key predictors that I found in my work with families was the father's relationship with the children's mother as well as whether the father was a resident or non-resident of the home. Specifically looking at predictors of father involvement, fathers who have a better relationship with the children's mother tend to have more access to their children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Coley & Hernandez, 2006).

During my work, I have noticed that human service agencies are more tailored to mothers. These services are tailored to mothers because historically mothers have been the primary caretakers of the children. It may facilitate more father involvement for agencies working with families to be welcoming and open to fathers whether they reside in the home or not. In fact, as professionals in the human services community, we have a responsibility to take a family systems approach when working with our clients to help better the family.

If human service agencies were more welcoming to fathers and more willing to educate them on child development, some fathers might understand that they can have a positive impact on their children, even if they do not live in the same household. This article will examine some of the things we as human services professionals can do to help involve non-resident fathers and educate them on the importance of their involvement.

As the Oprah Windfrey Show was coming to the end of its 25-year run, one of her guests who stood out was Lance Armstrong, the seven-time Tour de France winner. When he introduced himself, he did not talk about his cycling career but he said, "I am a father of three children." Clearly, he considered his role as a father to be more important than anything else he had achieved in his life.

In my experience in working with non-resident fathers and their families, I have found that it is important to:

- > Develop good rapport with the mother and child. Show respect and interest. Listen and hear the parent *and* child.
- > Educate the mother on the importance of father involvement. Share [why fathers are important](#) for the mother and child, in the future as well as the present.
- > Encourage shared parenting between the mother and father. Talk to the mother and father regarding co-parenting strategies for the best interest of the child. This includes inviting both parents to be present during home visits or, if this is not feasible, visiting with each parent separately to share the same information and activities.



- > During home visits (whether they are shared with the mother or not), engage the father while educating him on the importance of his involvement with his children. Make sure to bring along fatherhood-friendly materials that will help with this.
- > Encourage positive parenting communication between mother and father. Have a dialogue with both parents regarding appropriate communication while the child is present.
- > Encourage accessibility between the father and children. Talk to both parents about consistency, and emphasize that children do well when they know what to expect as far as time with mom and time with dad.
- > Encourage responsibility as far as the father meeting the children's needs. Speak with the father about his importance not only being around but providing for his children.

It is also important for you as the parent educator or human service professional to partner with the father in educating him on the importance of his role in parenting his children. It is important to keep in mind:

- > Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, and avoid high-risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy, and criminal activity compared to children who have uninvolved fathers (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008).
- > Fathers' emotional investment in their children's well-being also appears to be a major factor in children's social-emotional and cognitive development (Cabrera et al., 2000).
- > Fathers who had a positive relationship with their own father are more apt to stay involved with their own children. Also, fathers who had an absent father and/or a poor relationship with their own father have an increased risk of having a poor relationship with their own children (Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006).

Whether the father is non-resident or resident, it is important for us as professionals to try to encourage, educate, and engage him to the overall benefits his involvement will bring for his children. As President Obama shared, "The hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill" (Obama, 2009). We as parent educators and human services professionals can always think of new ways we can help fathers fill the vital role that they play in their children's lives.

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