



Including Fathers in Program Delivery: The hierarchy of father involvement

Creating services for fathers is a challenging prospect for any social service agency or educational institution. Many “family service” agencies find it complicated to recruit and retain men in their programs. Due to the complicated nature of engaging men in programming, this InfoSheet offers a three-step process for building toward father inclusive practices. Working toward father inclusiveness “is neither an impossible set of tasks nor a starting point for acrimonious debate... Change is certainly possible and the goal of more inclusive services fostering healthier more harmonious families is one to which we all can aspire.”¹

During each of these steps, an agency will benefit from conducting a full-scale father friendly assessment or father inclusiveness inventory. Four tools are listed at the end of this document.

1) Increase father awareness among staff: The first step toward father inclusive programming is for staff and administrators to recognize the importance of healthy father-child relationships. During this step, professionals develop an understanding of the important role and positive impact that fathers (including separated fathers, father figures and stepfathers) play in growing healthy families.¹ Father awareness sets the stage for father inclusion by educating staff about healthy fatherhood, addressing negative stereotypes about father involvement, and promoting a positive understanding that father-involvement is complementary to and supportive of mother-involvement.

Possible action steps toward building father awareness include:

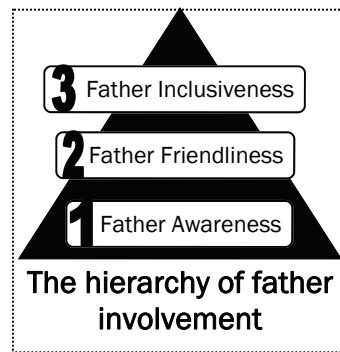
- Staff attend professional development training about the importance of positive father involvement, father-child attachment, and understanding maternal and paternal parenting styles.²
- Staff participate in training sessions on male and female communication styles.²
- Fathers in the community are identified through Census data, surveys, questionnaires, and other methods in order to gain information about demographics and service barriers/opportunities.
- Staff examine their own attitudes and beliefs (e.g., challenge their assumptions or myths) about supporting fathers in their fathering role and in balancing work and family.⁴
- Books, stories and articles about responsible fatherhood are shared at staff meetings and are added to agency libraries.

- Staff begin to utilize the phrase “mothers and fathers” in the place of “parents”.

2) Create father friendly environments: Father friendly agencies have the look and feel of a place that’s comfortable for men. At this level, an agency may not have father-specific programming, but it begins to consider fathers in its planning process. The National Head Start Information and Publication Center divides father friendliness into the following categories, quoted in part from the Head Start Bulletin on Father Involvement:³

First Impressions: The reception area is free of signs or posters that would be intimidating for men, e.g., posters that target men as batterers or dead-beat dads. The name of the agency is gender neutral or inclusive of men. The receptionist is friendly and comfortable with men and fathers participating in program activities.^{3, 2}

Physical Landscape: Visual materials include men and fathers of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds in positive roles; posters have positive, non-stereotypic messages. Magazines and brochures are relevant to both men and women. Materials are available in the home languages of the families.³



Role Models: There are men present in the agency, including male staff working with parents and children in roles other than as van driver, cook, janitor, or accountant.³

Linguistic Landscape: Verbal and nonverbal language and cues avoid stereotyped generalizations about men; there is no joking or humorous conversation where men/fathers are the butt of the joke; there are no informal negative conversations about men to be overheard.³

Materials for Parents: Equipment and resources are diverse and relevant for both fathers and mothers. Specific brochures/publications are provided for fathers, and non-custodial fathers are recognized, not marginalized. Referral lists and resource materials include services for fathers as well as mothers.^{3, 2}

Communications and Roles: Men in the agency, whether staff or clients, are listened to with open minds; their ideas are considered thoughtfully. Differences in male/female communication styles are respected – men are not expected to communicate exactly like women. Men are appreciated in both traditional and nontraditional roles. They are not asked to do all of the heavy labor tasks. Their ability to be effective and appropriate in their interactions with young children is recognized.³

Interaction with Parents: Mothers and fathers get equal respect and attention from staff. Fathers are addressed by name in their primary language, if possible. The staff expects fathers to be involved, welcomes them warmly, recognizes and respects differences in male and female parenting styles, and avoids “correcting” fathers as they interact with their children.³

Classroom Environment: Father-friendly children’s books, including non-fiction, are available. Pictures, posters and other visual materials show fathers at work and at home. Materials are available that fathers might enjoy using with young children. Curriculum topics and learning experiences are chosen that appeal to men. Stereotypic presentations of men in books, posters, toys, or conversation are avoided.³

3) Create father inclusive programming: Father inclusive agencies have programming that meets the specific needs of men. “All fathers have equal and fair access to the support provided by high quality family services regardless of income, employment status, special educational needs or ethnic/language background.” Furthermore, “a strengths’ based approach recognizes fathers’ aspirations for their children’s wellbeing and the experience, knowledge and skills they contribute to this wellbeing.”¹

Action steps toward achieving father inclusive programming include:

- The agency conducts an assessment of father inclusiveness.²
- The agency sets a measurable goal to include fathers.
- Fathers are involved in planning and implementing

fatherhood programs and other activities for the agency.³

- Staff recognize that fathers are the experts on identifying their support needs.¹
- The agency uses gender-neutral enrollment forms, permission slips, and mailing labels.
- Mothers recruit fathers and spread the notion of healthy fatherhood.
- Services aim to empower fathers to develop their capacity rather than focus on interventions that try to prevent them from doing harm.¹
- Parenting activities are diverse and relevant for both fathers and mothers.³
- Staff provide fathers with tools, information, policies, and programs that help them with their fathering role and in balancing work and family.⁴
- Staff invite fathers to participate in the full range of programs or activities (e.g., classes, groups, parties, child care, celebrations and other events).⁴
- The agency offers programs or services at times convenient for fathers to attend and participate.⁴
- The agency includes activities, materials, and individual and group exercises in its programs or services that appeal to fathers (e.g., activities-based and hands-on learning and that employ learning styles typical of men, such as visually-based, discussion, and debate).⁴
- The agency hosts speakers that address issues especially important to men/fathers, such as family violence, custody, co-parenting, harassment, visitation, child support, and men’s health.⁴
- The agency offers special events that celebrate fatherhood and fathers throughout the year, not only in June.⁴
- Staff provide referrals to resources that help dads with personal development, parenting, and family life in general.⁴
- The agency evaluates father engagement and measures outcomes of father involvement. Agency staff, at their annual performance reviews, are evaluated on their capacity to effectively work with fathers.^{1, 2}

Sources: The following tools provide strategies for assessing father inclusiveness and father friendliness

¹ Framework for Father-inclusive Practice for Early Intervention and Family-related Services, The Family Action Centre, The University of Newcastle Australia. www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/efathers/includingfathers

² Assessment Guide on Father Inclusive Practices, Neil Tift, Native American Fatherhood and Families Association, Mesa, Arizona. aznaffa@aol.com or (480) 833-5007

³ Head Start Bulletin-Father Involvement; Building Strong Programs for Strong Families: 2004, Issue No. 77 http://www.headstartinfo.org/publications/hsbulletin77/hsb77_11.htm

⁴ National Fatherhood Initiative, Father Friendly Check-Up for Business, www.fatherhood.org



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