

info sheet 19



The Protector:

Dads as assets for child safety and wellbeing

Protective Factors focus on prevention of abuse and neglect

Supporting parents to raise healthy children is a central goal for all family service programs, early childhood educational institutions, and social service agencies. An understanding of the protective factors can help to target services toward attributes that are proven to aid families in creating nurturing environments.

With support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) spent two years researching and identifying five protective factors that help families to prevent child abuse and neglect. According to CSSP, "extensive research supports the common sense notion that when these Protective Factors are present and robust in a family, the likelihood of child abuse and neglect diminish."¹

Why should father-serving programs think about the protective factors?

For fatherhood programs and, indeed, all staff who interact with fathers, an understanding of the protective factors can support healthy father-child involvement. In some ways, the protective factors are a logical place for practitioners to focus their

father-involvement strategies. The protective factors, in many ways, relate to one of the oldest and strongest archetypes of healthy

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fatherhood: the protector.

The image of a masculine protector is present in many cultures around the world. The protector is often portrayed as the warrior who fights evil and

wins.² He is the hero of folktales and folklore. The key to the identity of the protector is that he is on a quest for righteousness and not for personal gain: a hero on the side of right and good. This is a great way to introduce the concept to men — to help them understand their role in promoting the protective factors within their families.

How can father-serving programs translate the protective factors into fatherhood involvement?

Each of the five protective factors provides a framework for parents to consider their roles as protectors. For many fathers, this framework may spark a personal motivation to care for his child in new and important ways. The following descriptions come from CSSP and from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.³

1. Parental Resilience: This factor focuses on the ability of a parent to cope with stress and to bounce back. Dads can be strong & macho and, alternately, they can be flexible, tender, & loving. Like a fireman rescuing a child — many dads thrive on their ability to prevent injury and to provide safety. These two tasks show great strength and flexibility.

| Protective Factor | Translation |
|---|---|
| 1. Parental resilience | Be strong and flexible |
| 2. Social connections | Parents need friends |
| 3. Knowledge of parenting and child development | Being a great parent is part natural and part learned |
| 4. Concrete support in times of need | We all need help sometimes |
| 5. Social and emotional competence of children | Parents need to help their children communicate |

Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child and family 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.

Practice tips for working with dads:

- Ask dad about his dreams for his child.
- What are his worries as a father? How does he cope with them?
- How does he express his masculine side in healthy ways? How does he express his tender and loving side?
- When does he get stressed with his wife/partner/mother of his child? What has helped him to overcome that stress?
- How can (*this program*) help him to cope with daily stress?

2. Social Connections: This factor recognizes that we need friends, family members, and other adults who support us as parents. Dads need adult friends and real-life role models of healthy masculinity. In too many families, men are taught to “go it alone”. Yet, we know that our families and friends can be a great source of personal support. Additionally, research shows that men are more likely to show restraint when their valued male peers disapprove of violent attitudes or behaviors (peer pressure works for positive purposes).⁴

Practice tips for working with dads:

- Ask dads who they can talk to about their kids. About the mother of their kids. About themselves.
- Does he have a church group, sports team, hunting party, or other adults who support him?
- How does he share time with his wife/partner/mother of his child — so they both get free time to relax and reinvigorate?
- What are the activities in his life that help him feel like a better man, a refreshed man, a better parent? How can (*this program*) support him as an adult man and father?

3. Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: This factor emphasizes the importance of acquiring accurate information about raising young children and appropriate expectations for their behavior. We know that some dads are naturals, but most need some help to master parenting skills, just like moms. We also know that — given the chance — men learn to be competent parents, just like mothers.⁵

Practice tips for working with dads:

- Ask dad what he likes best about his son/daughter.
- Who are his child’s 3 best friends?
- What does his child like to do? What does he like to do with his child? How does he help his child to learn and grow?
- What can (*this program*) do to help increase his understanding of his child? Connect dads to parenting classes, early childhood family education, or other places to learn about child development.

Sources:

1 Center for the Study of Social Policy, www.strengtheningfamilies.net. The site’s resources include an organizational self assessment and sample training sessions for use with families.

2 Pearson, Carol. *The Hero Within*. Harper and Row: San Francisco. 1986.

3 Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Strengthening Families and Communities: 2010 Resource Guide.” www.childwelfare.gov/preventing

4 Kilmartin, Christopher. *The Masculine Self*. McGraw Hill: Boston. 2000. P. 245.

- Give new or expectant dads a copy of *The Daddy Book*, online here: www.mnfathers.org.

4. Concrete support in times of need: This factor addresses the basic needs such as financial security to cover day-to-day expenses and unexpected costs that come up from time to time. This factor recognizes that, sometimes, dads need an extra hand or — in tough times — even more. For many fathers who identify as the *provider* for the family, it may be hard to accept help, and even harder to ask for help.

Practice tips for working with dads:

- Connect dad to resources if he is in need of housing or food. Especially for non-custodial dads, these resources may be hard for him to find.
- Acknowledge the loosening of gender roles. It’s okay for dads to provide care and for mothers to provide income.
- Does he need help completing applications for services and supports? How can (*this program*) help?

5. Social and emotional competence of children: This factor recognizes the important role that parents play in helping children learn to communicate effectively. Dads can coo with babies, whistle with tots, and tell tall tales with teens.

Practice tips for working with dads:

- Emotional control and expression is an important parental role — both in modeling and in reinforcing with children. Dads can be role models of healthy emotional expression by interacting authentically with their children of all ages.
- Debunk the myth that men are dangerous for kids. It discourages men from involvement and limits their contact with their own children.⁶ Instead, emphasize all of the amazing ways that men reinforce children’s exploration, inquisitiveness, and gross motor skills.
- Dads often cite discipline and setting limits as the hardest part of fathering.⁷ How can (*this program*) help dad learn effective ways to manage a child’s changing behaviors?
- How can (*this program*) model appropriate adult-child communication skills that dads can use at home?

Conclusion: Dads are an important first-line of protection for our children. They help infants and youth to learn about themselves and the world around them. Dads and moms are important in their complementary parenting styles. By focusing on positive attributes of healthy masculinity, we can help more men to lessen abuse and to support healthy family interactions.

5 Pruett, Kyle. *Fatherhood*. Broadway Books: New York. 2000. P. 22.

6 Palm, Glen and Johnson, Lowell. *Introduction*. In “Working with Fathers”. Nu Ink Unlimited: Stillwater, MN. 1992. P. ii.

7 Minnesota Fathers & Families Network. *Do we count fathers in Minnesota?* St. Paul, 2007. P. 55.

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