



Great Ideas! for Family Leaders – Special Edition - September, 2017

Supporting Fathers of Children, Youth and Young Adults with Mental Health Needs

Dear Family Leaders,

We use the word “family” so frequently in our work. It is in the name of most of our organizations and we define it broadly to include biological, adoptive, and foster family, as well as extended family or other adults that have a role in the care of a child. However, seldom do we mention “fathers” in the context of our families. Though we don’t have actual statistics, if we asked our organizations to tell us how many fathers they serve, I am sure the number would be far less than the number of mothers who attend training or support groups or request one-to-one support. That being said, the important role of fathers cannot be emphasized enough. For this reason, FREDLA has devoted a special edition of **Great Ideas!** to the topic of supporting fathers.

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CHANGING ROLES OF FATHERS

From the Brady Bunch in the 70’s to Modern Family in the 2010s, it is not difficult to see the changing role of fathers whose roles have become less rigid and have evolved into shared responsibilities at home and with caring for children. A 2000 study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) found that fathers were more involved in caregiving:

- when fathers worked fewer hours and mothers worked more hours,
- when fathers and mothers were younger,
- when fathers had more positive personalities,
- when mothers reported greater marital intimacy, and
- when children were boys.

The modern day father comes in various forms. Today’s father is no longer always the traditional married breadwinner and disciplinarian in the family. He can be single or married; externally employed or stay-at home; gay or straight; an adoptive or step-parent; and a more than capable caregiver to children facing physical or psychological challenges. Psychological research across families from all ethnic backgrounds suggests that fathers’ affection and increased family involvement help promote children’s social and emotional development.

American Psychological Association
<http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/changing-father.aspx>

FATHERS CRITICAL TO CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Responsible and involved fathers can have positive effects on the well-being of children from the prenatal period and into adolescence. Emotional involvement during pregnancy can lead to a father's overall engagement in a child's upbringing (NJ, Cabrera, 2008). Researcher Lorraine Khan discovered that fathers have a critical role in children's mental health but need more support to fulfil their potential (L. Khan, 2017). Regardless of the changing role for fathers within a family, involved and responsible fathers have positive effects on the well-being of children and youth. Fathers involved in parenting their children exhibit three key dimensions to their parenting:

- A father's engagement with children and families;
- Their accessibility to their children; and
- Their assumption of responsibility for their children.

(Lamb, Pleck, Charnov & Levine, 1987)

Conversely, research from the National Fatherhood Initiative (www.fatherhood.org) also indicates that the absence of a father in the home can lead to an increase in negative risk factors for children including:

- More likely to have behavioral problems
- 4 times greater risk of poverty
- 7 times more likely to become pregnant as a teen
- 2 times more likely to drop out of high school
- More likely to face abuse and neglect
- More likely to abuse drugs and alcohol
- More likely to commit crime
- More likely to go to prison

Parents raising children with emotional and behavioral health needs deal with the ever present challenge of managing difficult behaviors, multiple doctor or therapy appointments, school meetings, keeping up with medication regimes, and balancing the care of other children in the home. Finding quality couple time is often times impossible for these parents. This combination of challenges and limitations can often lead to increased conflict in the home. The divorce rate among parents of children with special needs is estimated to be somewhere between eighty and ninety percent.

Research evidence also indicates there are three parenting qualities associated with positive child outcomes, whether displayed by the mother or the father:

- **A warm child-parent relationship** is a protective feature for children's mental health (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, Horowitz & Kinukawa, 2008);
- **Sensitive parenting** that is empathetic to the needs of children (Lamb, 2004); and

- **Effective parenting skills** that promote secure, supportive, reciprocal and sensitive relationships with children including boundary setting and positive supervision (Lamb, 2004).

FATHERS NEED SUPPORT

Fathers should be encouraged to maintain strong, positive relationships with their children throughout their development. Especially in low income families, a father's active involvement has been shown to reduce delinquency, psychological problems in girls, and behavioral problems in boys (Sarkadi *et al.*, 2008). It is important to encourage effective co-parenting and fatherhood skills during a child's early years, including pregnancy. There are multiple factors that contribute to a father's level of involvement in parenting:

- **Psychological factors** – fathers may feel a lack of self-confidence in parenting skills that becomes a barrier to getting more involved in parenting their child (Lamb, 2004);
- **Individual child characteristics** – fathers may experience more challenges to their parenting based on the temperament or gender of their child;
- **Social support** – a father's level of involvement may depend on the relationship with their partner and extended family members;
- **Community and cultural influences** – a father's level of active parenting will be influenced by his socio-economic status as well as cultural beliefs; and
- **Institutional, legal and public policy practice** – a father's parenting can be affected by father-friendly employment policies (or the lack of them), welfare support, and child support enforcement.

When these factors become barriers to a father's engagement with his children, community and family-run organizations can help to fill the gap by providing encouragement, support, and training for fathers. Most fathers want to do the best they can for their children, but some lack the support and information needed to achieve this. These deficits can lead a father to distance himself from his family which can be emotionally harmful to children. Organizations with a programming focus on the mental health of the entire family, co-parenting, and flexible scheduling of support activities and events will go a long way to facilitate growth in a father's involvement in positive child-rearing.



The *Strengthening Families Program* (www.strengtheningfamilies.net) suggests several strategies that programs can use to increase father involvement:

- Employing men as staff members in varied positions and in significant roles,
- Creating an environment that is welcoming and inclusive of all family members,
- Consistently communicating with both fathers and mothers on all issues concerning their children – and making this policy explicit to both parents,
- Hosting special activities and programs in response to men's expressed interests, and
- Intentionally inviting and encouraging men to become active participants in the program.

EXEMPLARY PROGRAMS FOR FATHERS

With an increased awareness of the needs of fathers, several groups have developed special programs for fathers. Fatherhood programs use a variety of approaches to provide peer support, help fathers build healthy family relationships, and develop positive parenting skills. We have highlighted several programs focused on fathers:

- ***Creating Lasting Family Connections Fatherhood Program: Family Reintegration (CLFCFP)***
The Creating Lasting Family Connections Fatherhood Program: Family Reintegration is an evidence-based curriculum designed for fathers, men in father like roles, and men who are planning to be fathers. The program is intended for individuals who are experiencing or are at risk for family conflict resulting from the individual's physical and/or emotional separation (e.g., incarceration, substance abuse, military service). The program is based on minimizing risk and enhancing protective factors through modifying the attitudes of participants and helping them to:
 1. Strengthen families and establish strong family harmony,
 2. Enhance parenting skills, and
 3. Minimize the likelihood of further personal problems.

<http://copes.org/recommended-process-for-reviewing-selecting-and-implementing-the-clfc-fatherhood-program-family-reintegration/>
- ***DadsMOVE (Mentoring Others with Voices of Experience), Tacoma, Washington***
Home of the "Dad-vocates", DadsMOVE is a family-focused, dads driven peer support model providing support, training, advocacy, and resources to the parents and families of special needs kids, and their local service providers. DadsMOVE is comprised of a group of parents, caregivers, and family members who believe in paying it forward so other families can experience success and recovery for their own family. www.dadsmove.org
- ***Fathers Involved Now (FIN), Pittsburg, Pennsylvania***
FIN is a program of the Allegheny Family Network and focuses on the issues and concerns that fathers of children with mental health and emotional concerns face daily, as well as providing avenues for a nurturing connection with their children. A Family Support Partner works with fathers to access resources and navigate child-serving systems. The Family Support Partner supports parents in giving them a voice and choice for their children through educating them on the systems and their rights to advocate for their children. www.alleghenyfamilynetwork.org/programs/fathers-involved-now
- ***Strengthening Families Program***
Strengthening Families is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is based on engaging families, programs and communities in building five protective factors:
 1. Parental resilience,

2. Social connections,
3. Knowledge of parenting and child development,
4. Concrete support in times of need, and
5. Social and emotional competence of children.

www.strengtheningfamilies.net

RESOURCES

- ✓ American Psychological Association: <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/changing-father.aspx>
- ✓ DadsMOVE: www.dadsmove.org
- ✓ Fathers Involved Now: www.alleghenyfamilynetwork.org/programs/fathers-involved-now
- ✓ *Fatherhood: the Impact of Fathers on Children's Mental Health*:
<https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=56881ded-e7ed-4616-ac71-8c78efa79628>
- ✓ The National Fatherhood Initiative: www.fatherhood.org
 - *Father Facts*: <http://bit.ly/fatherfacts7>

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