

# The Importance of Engaging Fathers

*George Fleming, C & G Consulting and Training*



# About our Presenter



George's community involvement is rooted in making a difference throughout the Pittsburgh, Allegheny County and across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. George is an Outreach Specialist/Trainer with Allegheny Family Network and has been a driving force behind the growth of the Father Involved Now Program, engaging men who are socially disconnected to reconnect them with their children and society. He is dedicated to serving men and fathers and restoring them as valuable contributors to their children, families, and community. He's also deeply involved in restoring men who are incarcerated, have been abusive to their partners or dealing with various mental health issues. He was instrumental in planting the seeds for the fatherhood movement in Western Pennsylvania and is presently, cultivating those seeds as part of the statewide Symposium Organizing Committee; the Pennsylvania Fathers, Families, and Service Providers Network; Pennsylvania Commission on Greater Father Family Involvement; and the Pennsylvania Office of Child Support Enforcement Parent's Advisory Board. In 2016, he founded The Father's Touch, a nonprofit 501c3 organization birthed from the years and passion working with men and families. George has mentored countless numbers of men, children and families throughout his professional career as a faithful community servant to all who entered his space. His greatest mentoring tool has been the example he has set by walking in faith and demonstrating the power of love.

# THE FATHER ABSENCE CRISIS IN AMERICA

**There is a crisis in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 18.4 million children, 1 in 4, live without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the home. Consequently, there is a “father factor” in nearly all of the societal ills facing America today. Research shows when a child is raised in a father-absent home, he or she is affected in the following ways...**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Living arrangements of children under 18 years old: 1960 to present. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.



**POVERTY**

**4X GREATER RISK OF POVERTY**

**BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS**



**MORE LIKELY TO HAVE BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS**



**MOM-CHILD HEALTH**

**2X GREATER RISK OF INFANT MORTALITY**



**INCARCERATION**

**MORE LIKELY TO GO TO PRISON**



**CRIME**

**MORE LIKELY TO COMMIT CRIME**

**TEEN PREGNANCY**

**7X MORE LIKELY TO BECOME PREGNANT AS A TEEN**



**CHILD ABUSE**

**MORE LIKELY TO FACE ABUSE AND NEGLECT**



**SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

**MORE LIKELY TO ABUSE DRUGS AND ALCOHOL**



**CHILD OBESITY**

**2X MORE LIKELY TO SUFFER OBESITY**



**EDUCATION**

**2X MORE LIKELY TO DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL**





# 18.4

**MILLION CHILDREN  
WITHOUT THEIR BIOLOGICAL  
FATHER AT HOME**

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**for more facts on father absence**



Fathers today  
are more  
involved in their  
children's lives in  
more ways than  
ever before.

# Know the Impact Fathers Have

A consistent hook for fathers is talking with them about the kind of adult they want their child(ren) to become.

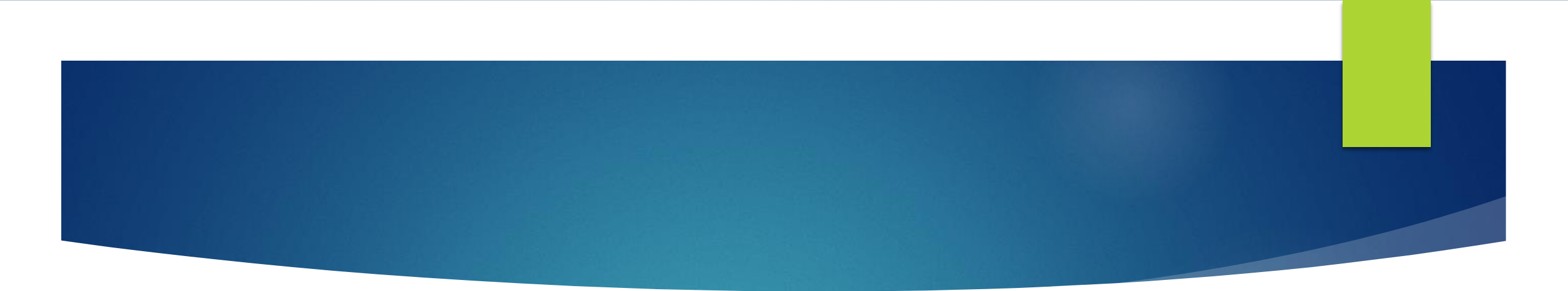
Fathers  
appreciate  
the idea of  
legacy:

“What am I leaving  
behind?”

“Is my daughter making a  
difference in her world?”

“Is my son the kind of man I  
am proud to have raised?”





One strategy to help motivate men to be more intentional in their parenting is to ***tell fathers about research that shows their positive involvement can have an unmistakable impact*** on various aspects of child development.

# Cognitive

Children with involved fathers are more likely to:

- ▶ Be more cognitively competent as babies and toddlers
- ▶ Live in cognitively stimulating homes, enjoy school, and be better academic achievers

**JUST THE FACTS**

Children who live with their dads **do better in school.**

SOURCE: Whitney, S., Prewett, S., Wang, Ze, & Haigin C. (2017). Fathers' importance in adolescents' academic achievement. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 8(3-4), 101-126.

**National Fatherhood Initiative**  
www.fatherhood.org

# Emotional

Children with involved fathers are more likely to:

- ▶ Be securely attached to their fathers
- ▶ Be more resilient and handle stress better
- ▶ Experience less psychological distress (fear, guilt, depression, etc.)
- ▶ Have a higher sense of personal control and self-esteem



**JUST THE FACTS**

**Involved dads improve their children's overall emotional and social well-being.**

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SOURCE: Adamsons, K., & Johnson, S. K. (2013). An updated and expanded meta-analysis of nonresident fathering and child well-being. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 27, 589-599.

# Social

Children with involved fathers are more likely to:

- ▶ Show higher social competence, social initiative, and social maturity
- ▶ Get along with their siblings and peers better
- ▶ Have a greater respect for authority
- ▶ Have a greater sense of empathy, tolerance, and understanding

**JUST THE FACTS**

Children with involved dads are **less likely to be mistreated.**

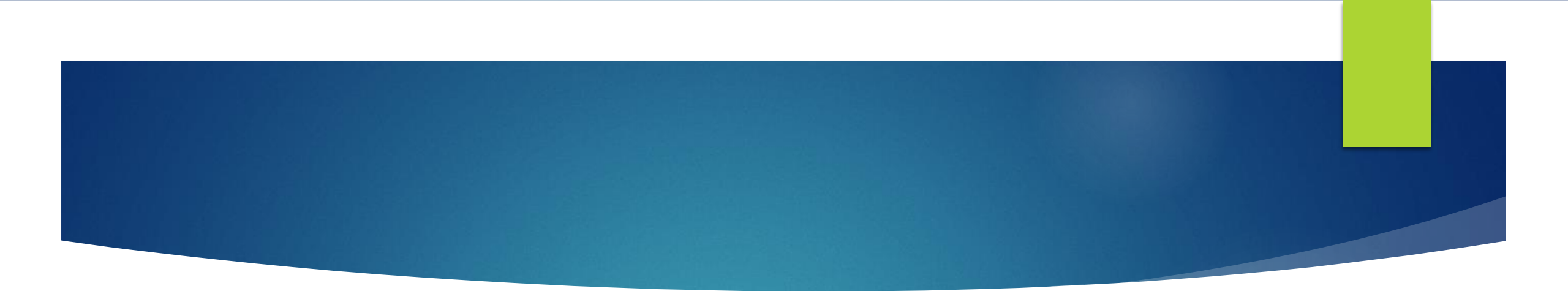
SOURCE: Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Social Indicators Survey Center. (2010). CPS involvement in families with social fathers. *Fragile Families Research Brief*, 46. Princeton, NJ and New York, NY: Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Social Indicators Survey Center.

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[www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)

# Understand the Diversity of Fathers

Men raising children can be grandfathers, uncles, step-dads, adoptive dads or big brothers.

Fathers come from a diversity of situations that do not reflect the traditional family structure, including single fathers, stepfathers, newcomer fathers, young fathers, gay/bi/queer/transgendered fathers, etc.



All types of fathers need to feel welcome, to be able to connect with other dads, and to have facilitators who they can identify with.

# Reaching Single Fathers

01

Provide referrals and support for separation, divorce, and grief counseling

02

Offer parenting courses for families in transition

03

Deliver support groups and parent education for single dads

# Reaching Young Dads

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Address concrete skills they can develop – relationships, communication, job, etc.

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Give practical help, like connecting them with employment services, housing agencies, and food banks.

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Reinforce that their involvement is beneficial to the mother, the child and themselves.

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Young dads need organizations and people who create a culture where it is assumed that fathers are involved in all aspects of fatherhood beginning with preconception.



# Diversity of Roles

The following are important roles that all fathers take at all stages of a child's life, from preconception to adulthood.

It is likely that every dad will have strengths in a few of these areas and will need to pay closer attention to development in other areas.

Consider the diversity of strengths and needs of fathers in your programing, as well as the diversity of backgrounds and family situations.

# Roles

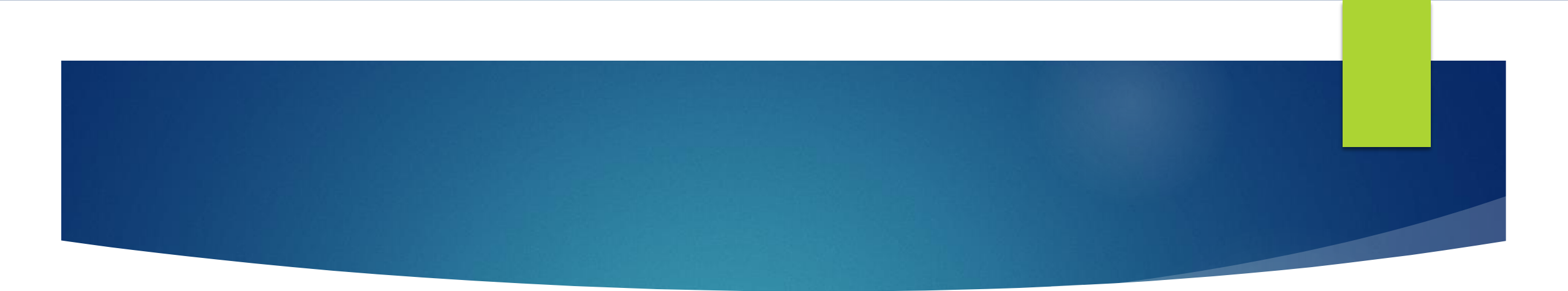
- 1. The Provider Father** (for the necessities of life) Dads need to look after the basics – food, clothing and shelter. *Providing these things by contributing to the family's economic well-being is an important part of fatherhood.*
- 2. The Interactive Father** (for human interaction) Spending time with their dad gives children and youth a chance *to learn communication skills, social rules, and the values that are important to their family.*
- 3. The Nurturing Father** (for care and comfort) Nurturing means helping someone or something grow. *Dads provide an environment where children feel important and cared for.*

# Roles

- 4. The Affectionate Father** (for warmth and love) A child's first relationships need to be filled with love and warmth. *Right from birth dads need to give kisses, smiles, hugs and affirming words to their children.*
- 5. The Responsible Father** (for guidance and protection) Fathers show they are responsible *by giving their children guidance, keeping them safe and secure, and teaching them about the world.*
- 6. The Committed Father** (for being important to someone) Commitment shows children that they belong somewhere and are important to someone. *They learn that their dad will have their best interest in mind, no matter what happens.*

# Stigma

- ▶ Some dads **sense a social stigma** that can discourage them from asking for help, being part of a group, or playing with their children.
- ▶ They can also **make assumptions about who the programs are for** (e.g. only for single, struggling, or abusive fathers).
- ▶ Some **experience shame when there are issues** in the home that need addressing.

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- ▶ Men walk into a family drop-in center or resource program ***and know right away they are not the majority.***
  - ▶ For some, this is not an issue, but ***many men will not feel comfortable being the only guy in a room*** of women and children.
  - ▶ It's important for staff members to be aware of this and to work hard to ***make fathers feel welcome and accepted.***



**Work &  
Finances**

Families require money to survive, and **dads often find long hours, long commutes, and stressful work environments** take them away from their time with their family.

**Work culture can make it difficult** for men to take parental leave and to **take time off for children's medical appointments, school functions, etc.**

# Value

Some men are not **convinced of the value** of using community programs.

They **may not see the link** between involvement in **programs and the parenting** they do at home.

# Off The Hook

Some fathers believe **they are not expected** to attend appointments, meetings and home visits.

If they do, **it is often treated** as a novel event.



# Barriers For Programs

## Environment

**First impressions matter to us!**

**What fathers experience** when they enter a center **will impact their choice to stay or leave.**



Some things that may turn a dad  
away:

## **An over-zealous welcome**

Dads don't want to be **put on the spot or centered out.**

# The Physical Layout

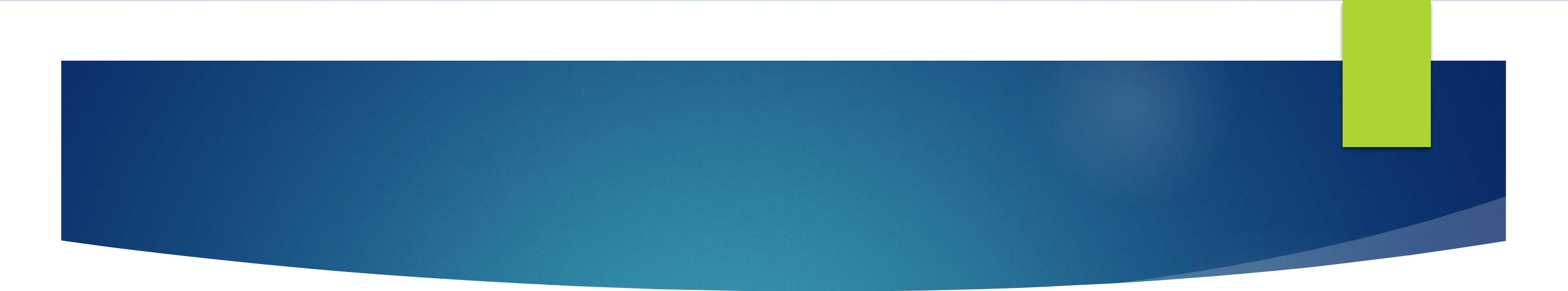
Fathers are less attracted to a program if the space feels crowded, the *chairs are too small*, if it is *not comfortable* to get down on the floor to play, or if the *décor* feels too feminine.

# Time

- ▶ Programs sometimes offer services during standard working hours *when many fathers (and mothers) are not available.*
- ▶ There are exceptions, but most dads are ***available evenings and weekends.***

# Biases

- ▶ Fathers ***sometimes detect subtle signs of bias*** in family program environments.
- ▶ Fathers will be turned off if they sense that staff members ***operate out of a deficit perspective***, seeing fathers as optional extras, helpers for mothers, or less interested, knowledgeable, and skilled as parents.

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- ▶ Operating out of a deficit model may lead a program towards making decisions for dads or ***telling them how to parent instead of engaging them*** in planning or tapping into ***their innate ability and desire to be good dads.***
  - ▶ This ***will often inhibit fathers' engagement*** with their children during programs ***or their participation in programs and services.***

# Father's Age

- *Fathering is different* for a **22-year-old**, a **32-year-old**, and a **42-year-old**.
- These men will have *different attitudes, peer influences, maturity levels, and experiences with their own fathers*.
- These differences need to be **taken into account** in the planning of **services, resources, and programs**.

# Assess your Father-Friendliness

1. Does the **entire staff** have an **understanding of the role men play** in children's lives?
2. Do fathers **believe there is value** to using the program?
3. Is there a **male on staff that fathers are able to connect with**?
4. Is there a **male volunteer or representative** (another father) who is the point for fathering activities?



# Program Father-Friendliness

5. Is the physical environment welcoming to fathers?

6. What biases may be influencing your efforts to engage men?

7. Are there resources available that speak to fathers?

8. Do promotional materials reflect fathers in the wording and images?

# Outline Potential Strategies

Success in engaging fathers requires being strategic, methodical, welcoming, and relevant.



# BE Strategic



Begin with identifying goals through a mission or purpose statement.



Clearly defined goals will allow for proper assessment of progress.



This will provide opportunity to assess every activity, resources and idea in light of its ability to meet the mission statement.

# Talk With The Dads

Have focus groups where fathers and other parents can share their ideas about what a relevant program would look like for them.





**Determine your  
population of  
interest.**

**Which fathers do  
you want to  
reach?**

# Universal programs

## **Programs aimed at fathers in general.**

They include family drop-ins, father-child activities, parenting programs, resources on involved fathering, and posters showing fathers interacting in positive ways with their children.

# Fathers at Transition Points

**Services and resources** for fathers who are going through change, like the birth of a baby, geographical transition, school readiness, adolescent life, or understanding child development.

# Fathers Facing Stressors

Programs and services for men going through grief and loss, divorce, or other issues that impact parenting.



# Fathers with Unique Issues

**Some men require specific help with their parenting.**

Domestic violence programs, therapy for men, chemical addiction services, legal services, mental health support and re-entry are examples.

# Develop Partnerships

Research shows that one of the keys to successful fathers' programming is developing partnerships.

# Some partnerships work well:

Food banks for meals

Stores for gifts, incentives, and support for activities

Community centers and other agencies for use of space

Volunteer organizations or high school students for childcare

Media outlets for help with promotion

# Be Relevant

The greatest pitfall in attempts to design fathering programs is not being relevant to the needs, interests, and requests of fathers.

# Timely Information

Being relevant also means being timely and appropriate with information and resources.

Transition points are excellent opportunities to share the message of involved fatherhood.

# Conclusion in Working with Dads

## ▶ **Be patient**

- ▶ Building a viable, successful program for fathers takes time.
- ▶ Give yourself that time and the freedom to build slowly.
- ▶ Focus on quality, not quantity.
- ▶ In time, the guys will come.

# Be Consistent

Although there may be times and events that need some adjustment, the consistency of staff, location, programming, and messages will help build trust in what is being offered.

# Be Flexible

From time to time reassess how things are going.

Periodically look to see what is going well and what can be changed.

Our children, our families and community deserve our efforts to encourage men in their roles as fathers.

The effort will be worth it.



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