



Involving Fathers

Key Principles and Characteristics of Father Involvement

The involvement of fathers in the lives of their children has been shown to improve their overall health and wellbeing. Children from fatherless homes are more likely to be poor, become involved in drug and alcohol abuse, drop out of school, and suffer from health and emotional problems. Boys are more likely to become involved in crime, and girls are more likely to become pregnant as teens.

Unmarried mothers are less likely to obtain prenatal care and more likely to have a low birthweight baby. Researchers find that these negative effects persist even when they take into account factors, such as parental education, that often distinguish single-parent from two-parent families.¹

Children in single-parent families are two to three times as likely as children in two-parent families to have emotional and behavioral problems.^{2,3}

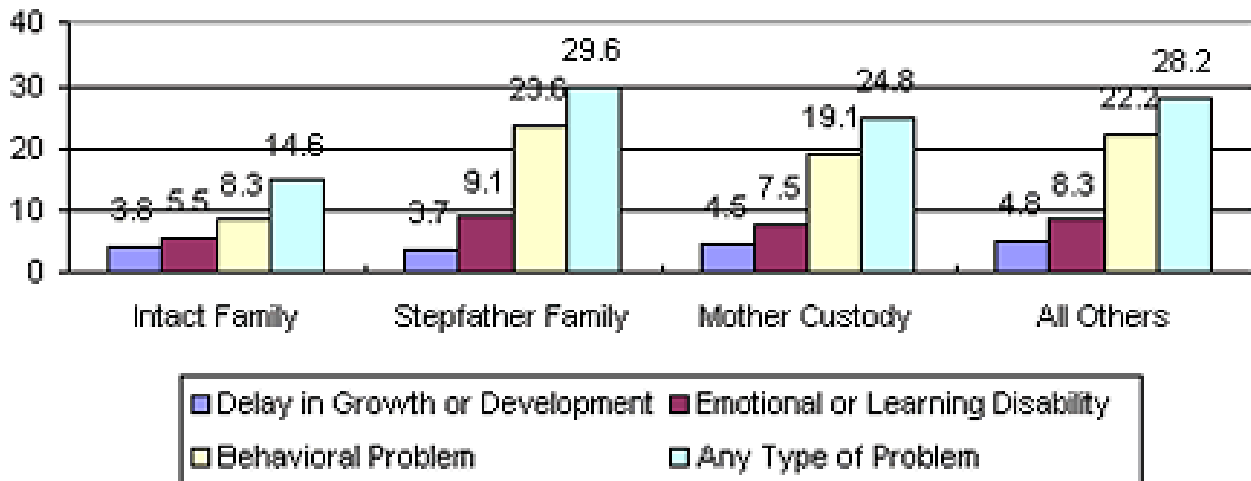
Adolescent females between the ages of 15 and 19 years reared in homes without fathers are significantly more likely to engage in premarital sex than adolescent females reared in homes with both a mother and a father.⁴

A responsible father, as defined by James Levine and Edward Pitt in their book *New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood* (1995), includes these points:

- He waits to make a baby until he is prepared emotionally and financially to support his child.
- He establishes legal paternity.
- He actively shares with the child's mother in the continuing emotional and physical care of their child, from pregnancy onwards.

He shares with the child's mother in the continuing financial support of their child, from pregnancy onwards.⁵

Percent of U.S. Children in 1988 Who Had a Behavioral Problem



The Seven Core Learnings on Fathers and Families – from the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF)

1. **Fathers care**—even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
2. **Father presence matters**—in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
3. **Joblessness and unemployment** are major impediments to family formation and father involvement.
4. **Systemic barriers**—in existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment—operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed “underground fathers,” men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.
5. **Co-parenting**—a growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills needed to share parenting responsibilities.
6. **Role transitions**—the transition from biological father to committed parent has significant development implications for young fathers.
7. **Intergenerational learning**—the behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced

significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within their families of origin.⁴

Restoring Fathers to Families and Communities – SIX STEPS for Policymakers⁷

Step One: Teach men to be good parents

Help fathers learn how to be good parents. This includes parenting classes for expectant fathers as well as the importance of good fathering for men who already have children. Good fathering has been shown to improve academic performance, decrease behavioral problems and will help children become better parents themselves. The Fatherhood Project of the Families and Work Institute emphasizes that preparation for parenthood should begin in boyhood, with programs that teach boys to behave responsibly, set high expectations, offer hope for the future, and ensure that all boys are connected to adult role models.

Step Two: Help fathers improve relationships with their children’s mothers

The development of “co-parenting” skills can help non-custodial, divorced or never-married parents stay intimately involved in the lives of their children. The Parents’ Fair Share program in Los Angeles, part of a state-funded demonstration project serving non-custodial fathers, has developed a special curriculum to help parents improve their communications and conflict resolution skills. Other ideas involve classes on conflict management and communication. In addition, resources should be available for those who are experiencing or have had a past history of abuse.

Step Three: Remove barriers to work for low-income fathers

Many fathers who become labeled “dead-beat” dads are unable to pay child-support because they are unable to find employment. Thus,

programs geared at helping fathers, must also help them provide financially for their children and themselves. This may include job-search assistance, job training and educational opportunities, and support to help men maintain their current employment. Many non-custodial fathers face additional barriers due to their criminal records. Programs can provide case managers, counseling and legal services to help these men reenter the work-force and improve their care and relationships with their children.

Step Four: Use federal funds to fund fathers' programs

States may use Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) monies to fund fathers' programs due to the reforms made to the federal welfare system. These funds may be used to end welfare dependence, promote employment, reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies and encourage two-parent families. Other sources of funding include, Social Services Block Grants, child support enforcement funds, Welfare-to-Work block grants and Workforce Investment Act funds.

Step Five: Make the child support system work for families

While states have worked to increase the amount of funds and the ease of payment for child support payments, this has also added to the frustration experienced by many fathers who believe that the current custody and visitation laws discriminate against fathers. Community activists can help fathers by lobbying on their behalf to encourage child support pass-through of funds, and modifications to welfare eligibility requirements to disregard child support payments in the calculation of a family's eligibility. Organizations dedicated to aiding fathers can also assist dads by helping them achieve and maintain custody and visitation with their children. As the Social Policy Action Network states, "the more connected fathers are to their children, the more likely they are to pay child support".

Step Six: Campaign to reinforce the message that "fathers matter"

Public awareness campaigns are a great way to reinforce the message that fathers matter. This not only will benefit fathers themselves, but also will help change society's views of the importance of fatherhood. Fathers can be given support at work, in their children's schools and in decisions regarding their medical care.

10 Ways to Strengthen Fathers' Connections to their Children – Nurturing Seeds of Promise⁸

1. **At home** . . . Share responsibilities of caring for children with their father. Setting up regular dates with dad gives kids and their father time to connect without interference and mom time to do something for herself.
2. **At work** . . . don't assume that men have no family responsibilities. Meetings should be scheduled at times respectful of family obligations and co-workers should show respect not condescension for men who put their families first.
3. **At school** . . . fathers should be invited to be room coordinators, book readers, active participants in academic progress conferences (whether or not they live with their child).
4. **At the doctor's office** . . . dad's opinion counts too. Health care professionals need to recognize that dads today play an active role in the physical care of their children.
5. **At school programs** . . . whenever possible, children with parents who live apart should receive two invitations to school events. Faces shine twice as brightly when they see both parents in

the audience.

6. **In legal situations** . . . dads' rights to see their children should be honored. Keeping a parent and child apart is painful to both of them. Only cases of mental, physical or sexual abuse warrant separating a child from her parent.
7. **In divorce** . . . feuding partners must be ever mindful of resolving conflicts without putting kids in the middle. This requires being objective about your children's needs (and not confusing them with your own) and compromising when the situation warrants.
8. **In parent education classes** . . . educators should plan courses with more than mom in mind. Researchers have found that men have special needs in parenting: more guidance about connecting with their children and, in some cases, assistance with anger management.
9. **In fatherhood programs** . . . it's fun to have activities where dads can do things with their children and other men. It's also healthy for men to have a separate forum to connect with other fathers about parenting issues that may be bothering them. Combination events with child care when dads meet without their children can help satisfy these twin needs.
10. **In marriage or family partnerships** . . . dad's ability to contribute to his children needs support and respect from mom. He may not do everything to mom's specifications, but he deserves encouragement for trying to be involved in his children's lives. Encouraging rather than chastising is an effective way to help fathers "get it right."

Helping Family Support Programs Promote Father Involvement⁹

Family support programs can promote father involvement by creating opportunities for fathers in all family configurations to participate in their children's lives. This means:

- Creating a **safe environment** for fathers to forge emotional bonds with their children so that they see themselves as nurturers and care givers;
- Recognizing that sometimes fathers are the **sole caretakers** of their children and providing them with the same supports and resources that are provided to single mothers;
- When working with two-parent families, involving **both parents** in activities, parenting classes, and other programs;
- Giving non-custodial fathers special **opportunities** to strengthen their bonds with their children;
- Providing opportunities for fathers to **network** and learn from each other;
- Providing **social services**, including employment assistance, to both fathers and mothers;
- Offering services and parent-child activities during **nonworking hours**; and
- Being **sensitive** to the shame that unemployed fathers may experience, and showing fathers that they are valued as *emotional nurturers* as well as financial providers.

Program staff should be aware that they might often be called upon to act as the moderator between divorced or estranged parents. Thus, they should become familiar with conflict management skills, and encourage their clients to learn how to become active listeners. Staff should help parents to see that when their desire to win an argument conflicts with the needs of

their child, the needs of the child must prevail.

As the National Parent Information Network notes, “programs should be sensitive to the needs of single fathers, who may benefit from meeting other men in their situation. Family support programs are well positioned to help these and all fathers fulfill their commitment to their families.”

The Family Resource Coalition has created a list of ***Principles of Family Support Practice***.⁷ These Principles include:

- Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
- Staff enhances families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youth, and children.
- Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs and to communities.
- Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multi-cultural society.
- Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
- Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
- Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
- Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
- Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance and administration.

Tips for Promoting Father Involvement from the Family Support America¹¹

1. **Expect fathers to participate.**

When the family's situation allows it, invite both parents to events, address letters and program information to both parents, and consult both parents when decisions about a child need to be made, even if by telephone. Make sure parent-child activities can be accomplished with one or two parents present, and develop activities that encourage parents to share interaction with their children. Of course, use discretion in working with families in which separation exists for the protection of family members.

2. **Go the extra mile.**

Send a personal invitation to fathers who never visit the program, explaining that you would like to meet them, since they are an important part of their children's lives.

3. **Create a neutral forum.**

Make sure that program literature refers to parents as "she" and "he," and that photographs on the walls or in brochures include both mothers and fathers.

4. **Make men visible.**

Have men on staff or as volunteers. A father might feel more comfortable participating if he doesn't have to worry about being the only man there. Spotlight a father every month in your newsletter.

5. **Meet fathers' needs.**

Conduct meetings or support groups for fathers, and provide services that address the interests and needs of fathers, such as employment assistance or training and recreation. Also, be wary of setting aside special resources for mothers (such as a "Mom's Room") unless there is a corresponding resource for fathers.

6. **Make fathers feel necessary.**

Sponsor activities that will help to show fathers that they are an important part of the program and of their children's lives. Get fathers to participate by calling upon their individual skills (in fixing up the center, teaching children to play a musical instrument or kick a soccer ball, cooking, etc.). Develop father-child activities. Host an annual Dads' Day.

Source Materials & Useful Resources

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