

# Supporting Youth to Experience the Benefits of Father Involvement: Implications for Child-Serving Professionals

by Lamar Henderson and Stacey Cornett\*

## Overview

Fathers' involvement with their children has been an area of focus and extensive research, especially during the last few decades. There has been a new level of appreciation for the ways in which fathers affect their child's functioning in all domains and in a variety of ways. Although studies have taken place on the topic of father involvement for the past few decades, in recent years, the child-serving systems such as education, child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health have also become highly attentive to this topic. Many system, state, and federal initiatives have

child-serving programs and educational settings. (Carlson, 2006; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006; Fagan & Iglesias, 1999).

Father involvement has been defined by Marsiglio and Lamb (2000, p. 276) as "positive, wide-ranging, and active participation [of fathers] in their children's lives." Despite the fact that there are numerous definitions of father involvement, the commonalities center on the distinction between the ways in which involvement can occur, and the quality, the consistency, and the frequency of interactions between fathers and their children. Father involvement occurs in

Child-serving professionals have long recognized the impact of all types of father involvement and strive to influence the presence of involvement in all of its forms.

## The Benefits of Father Involvement

There is clear and compelling evidence that children fare much better as a whole when father involvement is present (Mandara & Murray, 2006; Pruett, 2000). Pruett (2000) discusses the significant benefit that children with involved fathers have with regard to social development.

**Social Development.** The capacity to form relationships, trust in these relationships, and maintain them is clearly more enhanced for children who are involved with their fathers than for children who are not. As the child first learns to form social relationships with parents, this becomes a foundation and a frame of reference for the child in venturing out to relationships with other adults and, later, peers. In part due to the parental relationship, children will also experience greater empathy toward others, greater confidence and self-control, and greater overall well-being (Pruett, 2000). When a primary relationship such as that with the father demonstrates in repeated and consistent ways that relationships are safe and trustworthy, the child is much more likely to assume positive intent in relationships with peers. When a child experiences typical arguments, rejections, or misunderstandings, the interpretation of these events is much more likely to support the capacity to cope with these slights if good social modeling has occurred. Without healthy and consistent father support in this area, it is more likely that a child will interpret these events in an unhealthy manner, leading to a negative sense of self and an inability to cope with relational challenges. Children of involved fathers demonstrate much more positive peer interactions, less negativity and conflict in relationships, and more prosocial behavior and friendship-making skills (Hooven et al., 1995; Lieberman et al., 1999). Studies have also verified that the benefits throughout childhood carry over into adulthood. When social functioning

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been identified to address fathers' involvement with their children. The hope is that the results of these studies will weave their way into everyday practice to support youth in experiencing their fathers in new and different ways. The findings emphasize the distinctiveness of father interaction and that it cannot be replaced by mother interaction alone. This research offers child-serving staff great power to influence mothers and fathers to take opportunities to support father interaction in new and different ways within their everyday routines. The research therefore has important implications for all

many forms, including caretaking; financial, social, and emotional support; and play. Fathers, in collaboration with mothers, must ensure that their children's basic needs are being met and that expenses related to food, healthcare, recreation, and education are provided for. Additionally, the emotional needs for safety, security, and coping with feelings must be a part of the father/child relationship. Fathers are also one of their child's first teachers with regard to socialization and with making, maintaining, and coping with peer relationships. The relationships formed with teachers and other supportive adults are also significantly affected by the child's experiences with his or her father. Often, it is considered that fathers significantly affect their child in the area of play, which helps the child to grow in his or her ability to understand life events, roles, and relationships, and to cope with unpleasant and challenging feelings. Fathers more often engage with their child in tickling, teasing, and roughhouse play. This offers opportunities to learn self-control, communication skills, confidence, and assertiveness skills (Snarey, 1993).

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supported by father nurturance, care, and guidance is present in childhood, adults have stronger adult relationships, more satisfaction in romantic relationships, and greater levels of respect and tolerance for diversity (Grossmann et al., 2002; Moller & Stattin, 2001).

**Cognitive Development.** In the area of cognitive development, there are also strong differences between father-involved and non-father-involved youth. This area of research has the strong potential to change father behavior for the better because most fathers see increased cognitive functioning as something they would desire for their child. When considering how essential the basic capacity is to do things such as understand concepts, explore, and develop problem-solving skills, it is critical to facilitate any benefits children can have in these areas. All of these aspects of cognition have been demonstrated to improve when father involvement is present, consistent, and supportive of the child. The way in which children express their cognitive capacity is clearly linked to environmental and relational supports and not just the genetic offerings of their parents (Crandell & Hobson, 1999). A sense of safety, support, and encouragement from the father encourages the infant to continue to try when tasks are difficult. Infants with involved fathers demonstrate higher cognitive scores at six months. This is evidenced by greater attention to task, alertness, and purposeful exploration when given objects. Additionally, when infants in a control group do not receive this level of interaction, the findings demonstrate an overall reduced level of cognitive abilities. By the time infants with attentive fathers reach toddlerhood, they are also able to problem solve better than toddlers without involved fathers, and they demonstrate higher intellectual functioning at age three than children who do not have father involvement (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008). Once children reach school age, there are continued benefits. Studies demonstrate a greater level of appreciation for school, positive attitudes toward school and teachers, better grades, and higher levels of graduation from high school (Flouri, 2005; Flouri et al., 2002).

**Attachment Relationship.** From infancy moving forward, children who experience consistent and nurturing care from their father are likely to form a secure attachment relationship with their father. This status is known to assist a child in a plethora of ways related to their emo-

tional functioning (Bowlby, 1944). When children have a secure attachment relationship, there is a stronger level of awareness regarding emotional experiences and understanding the emotional experiences of others, and greater skills to cope with emotions more effectively. These capacities are present due to the ongoing empathic reactions of the father as well as the child's comfort with using the father to regulate when needed. When a child's emotional life is stable and well understood, the child can focus on exploring his or her environment so that learning and growth can occur. Additionally, the child with a secure attachment is able to resist and cope more effectively with traumas that he or she may experience (Parke, 2000). The

tremendous value of father involvement in mitigating high-risk behaviors.

### **Including the Father: Strategies for Behavioral Health Professionals**

All of the above research gives child-serving professionals more than enough reasons to ensure that every effort is made to empower and support fathers in being fully available to their children. In order for this to occur, it is necessary for individual practitioners to consider the influences that affect the way in which they may interact with fathers. Most practitioners have been trained to evaluate their own biases, histories, and influences that come into play when serving various populations. Practitioners should also be honest in considering

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ability to understand and cope effectively with emotions will carry into adulthood when early experiences lay a foundation for secure attachment (Bretherton, 1987). There is quite possibly no greater benefit a child can have than a secure attachment relationship with a parent.

**Health and Well-Being.** In addition to overall better developmental functioning, children are also preserved in terms of their health and well-being when fathers are actively engaged in their lives. The power of father involvement is seen as early as in the prenatal period. A baby whose father was actively involved with the mother during pregnancy has fewer birth complications than a baby whose father was absent during the pregnancy. Additionally, when a baby has an identified father on a birth certificate, the likelihood of living past one year is four times greater than for a baby without a father's name (Alio et al., 2010). Further research to substantiate how fathers assist their child in health outcomes was authored by Carr and Springer (2010). In their study, an infant with high-quality interaction by either a biological father or stepfather was found to be in better health than a child without father interaction. Life choices such as substance use, sexual activity, and crime, were less likely to occur when fathers were present in their child's life (Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Hoffmann, 2002; Teachman, 2004). This gives testimony to the

that in addition to biases, which everyone experiences, there may also be prejudices about which one may or may not be aware. There are numerous experiences that can affect the way in which a practitioner considers the role of a father. Some of the more common ones are:

- The practitioner's own relationship with a father;
- Changes in relationship status with father over time;
- Mother's shared feelings and experiences with a father;
- Experiences with the father of a child being served; and
- Past experiences serving single mothers.

If any of these experiences are largely positive or negative, it may be difficult to think in a balanced way about the individual father/child relationships that a practitioner may be trying to support. In an effort to minimize the unhealthy transference of these experiences into the therapeutic or supportive services that one may be hoping to offer, it is crucial to be aware of these influences. Supportive supervision should be sought to overcome acting on these influences in a manner that is unfair or not of benefit to the father/child dyad being served.

It is essential when providing supportive services to youth and fathers that self-awareness not be thought of as either a one-time

event or a static process. The way in which a practitioner thinks and feels often changes over time and is influenced by the dynamic nature of a relationship. For this reason, ongoing consideration of all variables that affect both the family and the practitioner should always be explored. With a commitment to self-awareness, there are ongoing opportunities for checks and balances to prevent unnecessary barriers to father engagement and involvement with their children.

**The Assessment Process.** For behavioral health practitioners, the cornerstone of treatment occurs in the assessment process. A comprehensive biopsychosocial assessment considers all variables that may be contributing to or ameliorating the risks associated with a behavioral health condition. In

prompt a mother to include a father in the assessment process when otherwise he may have been excluded. In addition to gathering information about the child, the form can include questions and opportunities for comments regarding any preferences, concerns, or requests for accommodation to ensure maximum engagement with both parents. Examples of these types of questions are:

- Are there concerns that you as a father have with regard to your child's emotional and behavioral functioning?
- Have there been efforts to assist your child in these areas that were successful?
- What do you believe is contributing to the problems that your child experiences in this area?

with the constitution of the planning partners and that they agree upon a time when everyone can attend. This will maximize everyone's comfort level and ensure that both parents are able to participate.

During the service planning meeting, the options for service delivery should be explored. This is the time when the parents, youth, and other planning partners determine the preferences for what types of services will be offered, the location of these services, and the frequency of the services. It should be emphasized that time for parental involvement is essential and times that work for all involved should be offered. Offering easy access and encouragement for involvement are two strategies that can facilitate the needed participation.

### **Including the Father: Strategies for Education Settings**

A number of barriers to father involvement within the school setting have been identified. Riley and Shalala (2000) describe some of the factors that fathers see as barriers to their involvement. Fathers report that they see the invitations and notices from schools as intended for mothers rather than fathers. Although, admittedly, this appears to be a function of societal roles, the lack of intentionality in inviting the father appears to reinforce this notion. Feedback also cited a lack of appreciation for scheduled work hours and the difficulty entailed in taking off work to attend meetings. Other barriers identified were a father's own educational and language challenges, making a father's comfort level in partnering with teachers an issue. In addition, when a separation or divorce is in place, communication is often fragmented or only one-sided.

Riley and Shalala (2000) list a number of suggestions that could improve a father's comfort level as well as encourage his full involvement:

- When a child is enrolled in school, it is important to explicitly ask for a father's contact information;
- When calling home, asking for either the father or mother would be helpful as well;
- Invitations to meetings or events should specifically state that both parents are encouraged to attend;
- When fathers work during the school day, it would be helpful to find opportunities for volunteering during non-school hours or on weekends even if that means promoting learning in alternative ways.

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order for an assessment to be complete, it should be informed by both the mother's and father's feedback with regard to impressions of the child. Although parental feedback, observations, and concerns are considered vital to the assessment process, many practitioners do not take the time to educate parents that this feedback must include both parents' perspective. The perspective of the mother and father may be very different and the assumption that one parent's report is inclusive and representative of the other parent's thoughts is a faulty one. To include both parents' perspectives in the assessment process requires communication and planning. At the time when an appointment is made, the expectation that both parents will be included should be shared. This practice, although more challenging in terms of scheduling, will ensure that all perspectives are understood and that the child's assessment is comprehensive and fully informed.

Often parents are asked to complete a history form related to their child's development, school experiences, and other relevant experiences as part of the assessment process. Behavioral health organizations and practitioners dedicated to increasing their level of father engagement and involvement can make advancements in this area merely by requesting that both mothers and fathers complete separate history forms. Simply by having this be a part of the process emphasizes the value of father input and may

- What types of supports or services are you hoping we can offer your child?
- Are there values, beliefs, or traditions that the program should keep in mind in serving both you and your family?
- Are there preferences you have regarding the time, location, and frequency of appointments?

When structuring the assessment session, it is important to offer parents the opportunity to meet alone with the assessor because there may be critical information that the parent is uncomfortable sharing with the other parent present. At the point that this information is understood, the clinician can then make an assessment and recommendation about how this information should be used to bring about change. For instance, the options could include parents meeting together for discussion or family sessions.

**The Service Planning Process.** In addition to ensuring that fathers are fully included in the assessment process, it is imperative that fathers be able to join in the service planning process. As part of a pre-planning activity, it is important to get feedback from both parents about who should be present in the service planning process. This may include natural supports for the family, other service providers, and current providers, all of whom may offer critical feedback to the development of a plan. The clinician should ensure that both parents and youth are comfortable

Many fathers stated a desire to attend classes or workshops to support their child's learning on evenings or weekends. Some schools offer parent breakfast times that a working parent can attend prior to going to work. When parent teacher associations are diligent about finding mentor fathers and inviting all fathers to attend, there is often more involvement in this forum as well.

### Including the Father: Strategies for Child Welfare Professionals

Fathers, whether residential or nonresidential, are consistently less involved than mothers in working with child welfare professionals. The policies, procedures, and practice of child welfare often fail to consider the extra steps needed to engage fathers. There are many examples of a failure to notify a nonresidential father when his child has been involved in a child welfare report or substantiation. Additionally, there are examples of fathers being involved, but the way in which they are engaged does not fully meet the needs of the child. If child welfare workers consider the numerous factors that can influence diminished interactions, there will be the possibility of better tapping into a father's potential.

Strained interactions with mothers are one of the most often identified reasons that father involvement is not as robust as it could be. Negotiation of mediation services can help to ensure that disagreements or failures to follow court orders are addressed. When fathers have been unable to see their children for periods of time, there is also the possibility that other family relationships are preventing the appropriate amount of parenting time for fathers. Fathers have often given up when it seems that numerous people are keeping them from seeing their children. Further, when fathers have experienced poor relationships with their own fathers, there tends to be a replication of this pattern for a host of reasons (Berg & Kelly, 2000). When child welfare agencies have the opportunity to hire mentor fathers, these can be a successful addition to the staff and can support fathers in a new and different way. Child welfare workers can have opportunities when their mind-sets regarding the challenges, intentions, and wishes of fathers consider multiple perspectives. With the presence of mentor fathers on staff, there are new opportunities for better understanding the intentions, wishes and challenges of fathers.

### Support for Fathers During the Prenatal and Post-Partum Periods

Support for fathers during the pregnancy period is an investment that all programs supporting expecting parents should consider. Support and education offered during this time can make a significant difference in later interactions between the father and baby. They can also facilitate a stronger connection and relationship between the mother and father, which in turn enhances the father's experience of sharing in the pregnancy. There are a number of opportunities and experiences that programs should highlight for fathers as they move through the pregnancy with the mother in order to optimize the emerging relationship between the father and his baby.

**The First Trimester.** During the first trimester, it is helpful to assist the father in considering the experiences of the mother

remember specific experiences with his own father; and

- Plan for how he will integrate his relationship with the infant with his relationship with the infant's mother.

**The Third Trimester.** During the third trimester, the father is encouraged to find ways to:

- Share with the mother his parenting values and beliefs;
- Spend time talking to the baby and communicating with the baby through touch and massage;
- Prepare others in his life for changes in relationships, priorities, and behaviors that will support the baby needing his full attention; and
- Prepare the environment to keep the baby and mother safe and provided for.

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in a focused manner to increase his ability to feel involved in preparing to know and love the unborn child. Programs should encourage the father to:

- Take time to try to understand the physical sensations of the mother and "join" with the mother to imagine what is happening for the baby;
- Allow time to consider the many emotions of both the mother and himself during this time;
- Recognize and explore his feelings related to being a protector of both mother and baby during this time; and
- Support mother and baby by considering what it will take to help create a safe and nurturing environment for the infant.

**The Second Trimester.** During the second trimester, there are additional and different concepts to promote to fathers. These include encouraging the father to:

- Allow for time to develop an image of who the baby will be and how it will feel to be a father;
- Consider the characteristics he hopes to have in the parenting role;
- Explore how he believes his own father may have felt before he was born and

**The Post-Partum Period.** During the post-partum period, to assist the father in bonding and identifying with the father role, he is encouraged to:

- Interact with both mother and baby on a regular basis and find ways to communicate his desire to meet their needs;
- Focus on learning his baby's unique characteristics, preferences, and styles of interaction;
- Spend as much time as possible holding, comforting, and getting to know his baby; and
- Give both the mother and himself the needed time to learn their new role and seek support as needed.

### A Highlighted Program: The All Dads Matter Program

Merced County Human Services Agency, All Dads Matter (ADM) program assists fathers to better understand the significant impact their role as fathers plays in the lives of their children. The program recognizes the need for fathers not only to learn how significant they are to their children but to have opportunities to strengthen their involvement. By improving the understanding of the potential impact a father

can have on a child, the hope is that fathers will be more involved and dedicated to the lives of their children. This is addressed by promoting responsible parenting through education, empowerment, mentoring, and supportive services. The program finds that weaving all components together is needed to support a father to be as supportive to his child as possible. Fathers need the educational component, but when faced with real-life challenges, they need assistance in locating resources that are critical to their success. Fathers are also in need of a sense of hope and empowerment to assist them in changing not only their mentality about their role but their ability to get both their and their child's needs met. Staff within the program can offer real-life experiences due to their own status as fathers and grandfathers.

All Dads Matter focuses on the unique needs of fathers in a positive, nurturing manner, encouraging men to assume a

- Developing flexible behavior by learning to recognize and challenge irrational beliefs;
- Developing multiple solutions to problems;
- Developing realistic expectations for yourself and others; and
- Understanding co-dependency.

The group is offered in an "open-group" format, so the needs of the dads take priority over covering curriculum.

The All Dads Matter Resource Center is a "one stop" center where dads can get one-on-one support addressing any need they may be facing, be it advocating for themselves and their children or connecting with resources in the community. The resource center has computer access available to the dads and a family-friendly environment that welcomes dads as well as their children. All Dads Matter offers a catalogue of male engagement activities focused on

- Diggin' in the Dirt with Dad: This workshop emphasizes the importance of growing and eating fresh fruits and vegetables.

All the workshops are fun and interactive and encourage fathers to educate their children through play.

Boot Camp for New Dads is a one-day, three-hour workshop that prepares first or expectant dads to care for their new baby, mom, and themselves. There are three roles in the workshop: the rookie (expectant dad), the veteran (a dad who has completed the workshop and brings his 0 to 6 month old baby), and the coach (facilitator). The workshop is broken down into three one-hour sessions.

The first hour includes:

- Welcome-introduction-concerns;
- Activity: Words that describe your dad vs. words your kids will use to describe you;
- Understanding and supporting mom and her unique challenges while pregnant; and
- Working as a team to meet the needs of the new baby.

The second hour includes:

- Post-partum and mom;
- Gate keeper/communication;
- Crying baby checklist;
- Dad's bag of tricks (what's in your diaper bag); and
- Activity: Veteran dads show rookies how to safely hold a baby.

The third hour includes:

- Safety: Home safety, introducing baby to pets;
- Plan for preventing "shaken baby";
- Original concerns; and
- Closing.

All rookies receive a Boot Camp for New Dads diaper bag filled with items for the new baby.

For more information about the program, contact Lamar Henderson at [lhenderson@hsa.co.merced.ca.us](mailto:lhenderson@hsa.co.merced.ca.us).

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healthy and active role in the lives of their children. The program includes the ADM Resource Center, Boot Camp for New Dads, Men's Support Group, and Male Engagement Workshops. The Men's Support Group includes a parenting component and an anger-management component. In the parenting component, the following topics are covered:

- Defining a father's role and responsibility;
- Time management;
- Effective communication;
- Ages and stages of development (newborn to 12 years old); and
- Communicating "family values" with significant other.

In the anger-management component, the following topics are covered:

- Critical thinking skills;
- Skill building in "controlling anger/identifying triggers";
- Identifying characteristics of "low self-esteem";
- Recognizing responsibility for emotions;
- Correlation between addiction and violent behavior;

encouraging dads to play an active role in the children's education experience. These activities give new and helpful information to dads regarding how to increase their time, presence, and involvement within the school environments. The workshops are facilitated at Head Start locations and elementary schools throughout the county.

A number of workshops are held to increase father involvement in a way that is fun and engaging for both fathers and their children. The workshops are designed to appeal to the fathers as activities that they could see themselves doing with their children. Workshops offered include:

- Man Plays with Food: This workshop focuses on creating healthy snacks with your child while enhancing his or her education. The workshop supports positive interaction in a way that is fun for both dads and the children.
- Men and Kids Moving and Learning: This workshop focuses on 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise in the form of dance and music.
- Silly Slimy Science: This workshop introduces science concepts with simple and fun experiments such as "Ooblig" (slime) or Bubbles.

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