GETTING FATHERHOOD TO THE FOREFRONT: CURRENT RESEARCH, BEST PRACTICES RECOMMENDATIONS
Agenda

- An Overview of Fatherhood Efforts
- The Importance of Fathers in Healthy Child Development
- The Challenges in Supporting Strong Father/Child Relationships
- Effective Practice: What Does the Research Say
- Considerations for Community-Based Agencies and Other Practitioners
Why A Focus on Fathers?

- Since early 1990s, growing recognition that we need to do more to support fathers in their parenting role.
  - Increasing numbers of children growing up without connections to their fathers due to a number of social/demographic changes
  - Changing social norms in which fathers are expected and want to be more involved in childrearing
  - Emerging neuroscience that confirms the importance of responsive, nurturing relationships between children and adults (fathers) for healthy development
Past two decades have been a time of innovation, experimentation, development, and learning.

- Explosion of diverse fatherhood programs and services in local communities.
- National fatherhood initiatives – both public and private.
- State fatherhood initiatives across country, including NC.
- Federal funding through Responsible Fatherhood Initiative and the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood. States using TANF and other sources of funding for programs.
- Research and evaluation on young unwed fathers (Fragile Families), and on the involvement of fathers in child welfare, child support enforcement, and other...
Fatherhood Today

- Continued awareness and recognition of need to support fatherhood efforts but.....
  - Dwindling resources for state-supported efforts (recession, state budget cuts, etc.)
  - In North Carolina, changes in leadership and priorities at all levels
  - Grassroots and community-based programs operating with limited resources and support
  - Rigorous research about what works is extremely limited.
Fatherhood Tomorrow

- How can we move forward in North Carolina in a way that:
  - builds on the exceptional work that has been done in communities,
  - meets the challenges we all face in terms of resources,
  - uses research on what works to guide our efforts, and
  - Helps us work collaboratively and strategically
Father Definition

- Social Fathering-anyone who serves as a “father” figure or takes on those roles
  - Grandfather
  - Uncle
  - Family Friend
  - Maternal Partner
  - Step-Father
The Impact of Fathers on Child Development

- Why are fathers important to children?
- Nurturing, guidance, teaching, modeling, economic support, tangible support (help with household), co-parenting support for mother, and much more.
- Each of these functions are critical to creating an environment in which children thrive.

BOTTOM LINE:
Engaged fathers positively impact child development.
How Do We Define Father Engagement?

- Literature defines a number of “measures” of father involvement that try to assess the level and type of father’s interaction with his children.
## Fathering Indicator Category Operational Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father Presence</td>
<td>A three-part process involving father engagement, availability, and responsibility in relationship to children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caregiving</td>
<td>Providing nurturance and performing routine tasks necessary to maintain children’s emotional well-being, physical health, and appearance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children’s Social Competence and Academic Achievement</td>
<td>Actively engaging with children and others in developing and enhancing their social competence and academic achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cooperative Parenting</td>
<td>Fathers, mothers, and other caregivers establishing a supportive, cooperative interdependent relationship aimed at optimal child development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers Healthy Living</td>
<td>Providing a role model through healthy lifestyle, education, and appropriate social behaviors that teach work and personal ethics, as well as social norms, to help children grow and become productive members of society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Material and Financial Contributions</td>
<td>Engaging in consistent activities that provide material and financial support to children</td>
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Father Engagement

- Bottom Line: Fathers that demonstrate nurturing, supportive, emotionally responsive behaviors with children.

- Quality of Interaction Vs. Quantity of Interaction

- There is no single role that fathers should aspire to.
Impact: Socio-Emotional Development

- Important socializing role
- More positive social development
  - Emotionally secure and confident
- More positive social competencies
- Higher self-esteem and more secure
  - Lower rates of anxiety and depression
- Less likely to exhibit violent and defiant behaviors
Impact: Cognitive Development and Educational Success

- Have higher cognitive abilities, educational attainment, **language abilities** and school readiness

- Children that are at risk for developmental delays are more likely to make up the gap or be further along than anticipated

- Able to more adequately communicate with others and about themselves
A Helpful Model: Brain Architecture

- Fathers are important because they help build healthy brain architecture in their children.
- What is brain architecture?
Fathers: Raising Our Future Leaders

- We know from neuroscience that children’s brains are built through their experiences.

- Nurturing, interactive, responsive interactions with adults builds healthy brain architecture in children, providing a strong foundation for all their future learning and growth (cognitive, social, emotional).
Fathers and Brain Development

- When children have this strong foundation they are more likely to have the skills and abilities to contribute as future citizens, parents, business leaders, and workers, and ultimately, lead a purposeful life.

- Fathers play an important role in building healthy brain architecture for children.

- Do dads understand the impact they have on the brain development of their children?
Current Picture of Father Involvement

- Changing Social Norms: Are social expectations of fathers shifting? Do we expect Dads to participate in caretaking differently?

- Are these roles different in-home vs. non-resident/absent fathers?
Where Is Fatherhood Engagement today?

Low Father Engagement  High Father Engagement

Absent Fathers and Their Impact on Children and Families

- Longer Term Poor Outcomes: Increased father absence is associated with poor school achievement, less involvement in labor force, greater risk-taking.

- For example:
  - children that grow up without their fathers are twice as likely to repeat a grade or be suspended
  - children living without a father are more likely to suffer mental and physical health problems than those children that do have a father in their lives
  - Children living without a father are dramatically at a greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse
Impact of Absent Fathers Cont.

- Why those poor longer-term outcomes?
- Remember, children need an environment of stable, nurturing, responsive interactions with adult caregivers in order to develop healthy brain architecture.
- Children whose fathers are absent or not positively engaged are more likely to experience these types of interactions because:
  - Father is not available to provide those interactions directly with his child
  - Father’s absence can provide social stress on the family, particularly the mother
  - Father’s absence can mean economic loss
  - Poverty, especially financial strain, can cause fathers to become more negative and hostile towards children
Barriers to Father Engagement

- Traditional social norms that emphasize mothers' primary role as caretaker.
- Gender social norms that discourage fathers from expressing warm, nurturing behavior.
- Not a lot of resources for fathers
- Past Research Issues (foundation) and still new
- Relationship between mother and father
Potential overlap of all four
Father Engagement Expectations
Father Engagement Ability
Mother Engagement Expectations
Mother Engagement Ability

Potential overlap of all four
Barriers to Father Engagement

In Programs That Could Provide Services

- “Maternal-Centric” agencies and systems
- Lack of greater awareness of resources for fathers
- Fatherhood programs “sideline initiatives”
- Staff attitudes and biases
What Do These Barriers Mean…

- ALL FATHERS are facing changing social norms and are at different places in their approach to parenting.
- Fathers, particularly those with multiple risk factors (low-income, unemployed, incarceration, undereducated) experience enormous stressors that impact their behavior and capacity for parenting.
- Powerlessness and lack of hope
- “All or nothing” frame for involvement with their children
- Perceived negative repercussions for involvement
How can you help breakdown barriers?

- Ask, “What about dad?”
- Have fatherhood support systems
- Always take a strength based approach
- Appeal to Father’s sense of learning
How can fathers get engaged?

- Discuss with dad how important brain architecture and how they have a unique impact

- Getting them started earlier

- Encourage conversations regarding engagement with their significant other

- Expressing quality over quantity
Our Lens For Review

- What do we know about the effectiveness of programs and strategies (e.g., what works?)
- If something is found to work, can it be replicated and what would it take?
- We have divided this up into two parts for this workshop:
  - Part I: Defined fathering programs
  - Part II: Best practices in successful programs and existing agency services to engage, recruit, and serve fathers
PART I: FOR FATHERING PROGRAMS

- What does the evaluation research literature point to in terms of “evidence-based models”?
  - Programs that have been rigorously evaluated (experimental evaluations) and have been proven to be effective

- If found effective, what is “ready” to be replicated
  - Has evidence of effectiveness AND is operationalized AND has capacity to help local communities implement with fidelity
  - We KNOW from lots and lots and lots of research, that effective programs implemented poorly produce poor or harmful outcomes.
A Word About “Evidence”….

- Continuum of evidence – from anecdotal to pre/post tests to using comparison groups to doing the “Gold Standard” of evaluation, the Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT).
- The further along the continuum your evaluation is, the stronger your “evidence” of effectiveness.
- Who cares and why?
  - Government, funders, policymakers, the public, the fathers you serve.
- Goal: Building evidence takes time and intention but is important for the future of work with fathers.
What We Found

- Research focus on fathers specifically is still fairly new
  - For many years, we generalized findings from programs that worked primarily with mothers

- Most research is descriptive and focuses on the process of providing services.

- Those programs to be effective or promising have limited evaluation (non-experimental designs)

- Co-parenting programs aren’t evaluating individual effects on each parent
Father Specific Programs and Co-Parenting Programs

<table>
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<th>Parenting Programs Designed Specifically for Fathers</th>
<th>Parenting Programs Designed for Any Parent/Caretaker</th>
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<td>Examples: Conscious Fathering, Family Transition Program, Parenting Together, Dads for Life</td>
<td>Examples: Incredible Years, Triple P, Strengthening Families, Circle of Parents</td>
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- Most programs have limited evaluation.
- The few RCTs are of locally-based programs and there is typically only one study that has been done.
- Many of these programs do not have capacity for successful replication in other communities.
- Programs that do have capacity for replication (and are being replicated) have limited evidence of effectiveness.

- Many programs have strong evidence base and several have support for implementation in NC.
- Although outside scope of this review, preliminary examination of evidence indicates these programs are effective with fathers.
- The programs require some level of “readiness” of dads to engage
Best Practices

From the Literature, what emerges as “best practices” in implementing fatherhood programs and services.

- Readiness
- Program Format
- Setting and Preparation
- Staff Considerations
Readiness

Degree to which the agency/community is “ready” to engage in fatherhood work

- Organizational commitment
  - Buy-in from top leaders throughout agency
  - Commitment demonstrated in relationships with other agencies (e.g., courts, nonprofit providers, etc.)
  - More than “verbal rubberstamping” -- Specific behaviors that send a message that fathers are important
  - Willingness to explore and support changes in policy, practice

- Physical Environment of Agency
- Training and support through reflective supervision, consultation, peer learning
Successful Programs had the following:

- Had a focus on what fathers bring to the table (positive contributions) in terms of child development.
- Format also appealed to father(s) sense of learning, particularly from each other.
- Program format was facilitated discussion instead of lead discussion or lecture (side by side). Peer support groups seem to be an effective strategy.
- Language used is father appropriate and present
- Relied on social assessment to understand specific needs of fathers

- Have mothers “buy-in” to the program and support/encourage fathers attendance
Best Practices-Staff Considerations

- When recruiting and hiring staff, make sure outlook and background reflect agency or programs policies and priorities (if possible, incorporate questions in hiring process that will help hiring manager identify this)

- Have male staff or if not possible, male sensitive staff

- Staff should seek to understand social situation that put fathers at accumulated risk for absenteeism (and understand the behaviors that father may exhibit as a result of those risks)

- Make sure when working with fathers that staff is talking “with” them and not “at” them
Fatherhood Programs

Moving Forward: Considerations
What Should Be Done Moving Forward

- Focus on promoting healthy child development and strong brain architecture as the “story” of fatherhood work and programs
  - Avoids language than can elicit “negative” images of fathers and undermine support for your work
    - E.g., You say….“Responsible fatherhood” and they hear ….”Deadbeat dads” (why should I help them!)
    - E.g., You say….help dads meet their moral and financial obligations to their children and they hear….”Irresponsible fathers who don’t care about their children.”
Promoting Healthy Child Development

- Be more inclusive of definition of father
- Consider social norms, especially as related to parental role in child's life
- Conceptualize fathers as co-parents, rather than mother's helpers
- Change discourse to allow father to enjoy parenting
- Promote fatherhood as a life project
Engaging Fathers in Services

- Agencies serving children and families intentionally assess whether their organization is “father-friendly”
  - Organizational norms strongly influence behavior of staff and volunteers
  - Takes leadership and the commitment of the whole organization to change organizational and social norms
  - Process that is iterative and ongoing (part of a learning organization)
  - Focus not only policies and procedures that impact clients and staff
Choosing and Implementing Programs

- Research – if at all possible, look for programs with some promising research before making up your own

- Implementation is key – we know that research identified core components are critical to getting good outcomes
Core Drivers for Successful Implementation

- Community and agency readiness
- Pre-service and in-service training
- Coaching and consultation
- Program evaluation
- Quality assurance
- Administrative/policy support
Moving Forward

- Step 1:
  - Engaging dads is dependent on social norms change

- Step 2:
  - Use research to inform practice

- Step 3:
  - Make use of existing resources
Thank You!
References


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