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

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Two Decades of Hard Work

- 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

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

Father Presence	A three-part process involving father engagement, availability, and responsibility in relationship to children
Caregiving	Providing nurturance and performing routine tasks necessary to maintain children's emotional well-being, physical health, and appearance
Children's Social Competence and Academic Achievement	Actively engaging with children and others in developing and enhancing their social competence and academic achievement
Cooperative Parenting	Fathers, mothers, and other caregivers establishing a supportive, cooperative interdependent relationship aimed at optimal child development
Fathers Healthy Living	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
Material and Financial Contributions	Engaging in consistent activities that provide material and financial support to children

CITE: ***The Fathering Indicators Framework: A Tool for Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis***, National Center for Fathers and Families.

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

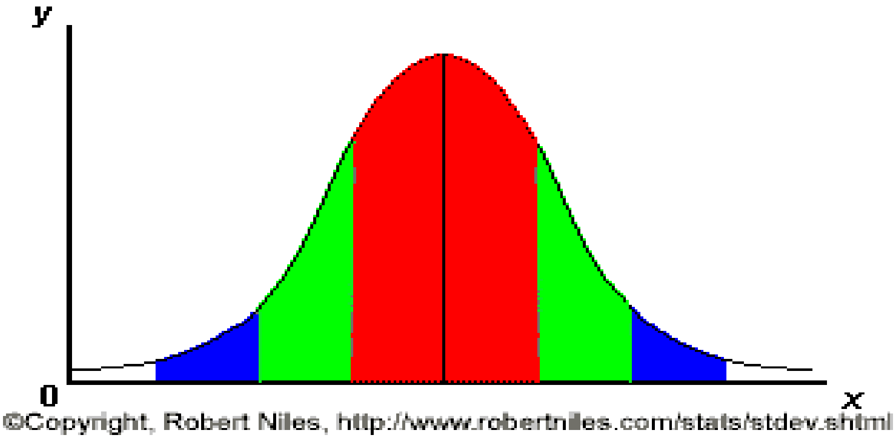
Impact: Cognitive Development and Educational Success

- 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
- Healthy Brain Architecture

Current Picture of Father Involvement

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

Where Is Fatherhood Engagement today?



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Absent Fathers and Their Impact on Children and Families

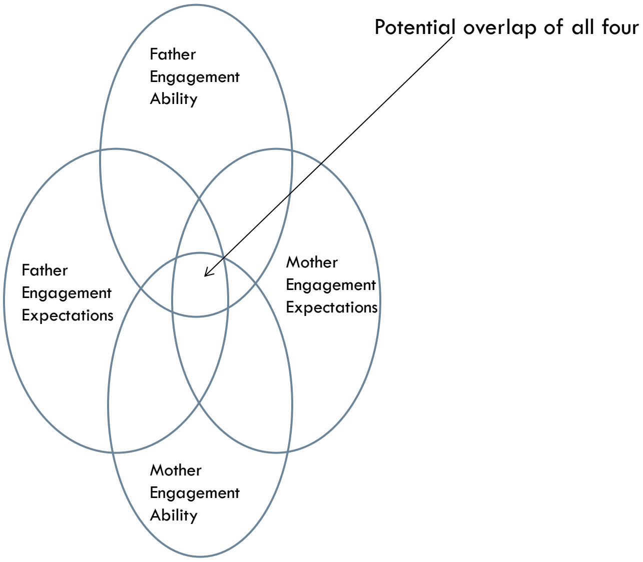
- Longer Term Poor Outcomes: Increased father absence is associated with poor school achievement, less involvement in labor force, greater risk-taking.
- For example:
  - children that grow up without their fathers are twice as likely to repeat a grade or be suspended
  - children living without a father 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.

- 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
  - U.S. Census Report
  - Tide commercial
- Gender social norms that discourage fathers from expressing warm, nurturing behavior
- Relationship between mother and father



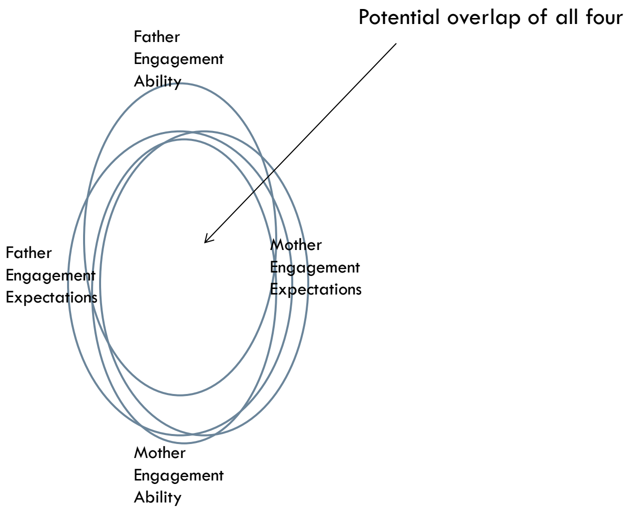
Potential overlap of all four

Father
Engagement
Ability

Father
Engagement
Expectations

Mother
Engagement
Expectations

Mother
Engagement
Ability


Potential overlap of all four
Father Engagement Ability
Father Engagement Expectations
Mother Engagement Expectations
Mother Engagement Ability

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 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 are strong disincentives

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
- Fathers need their children as much as children need their Fathers

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

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

Best Practices-Program Format

- 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

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Fatherhood Programs

Moving Forward: Considerations

What Should Be Done Moving Forward

Promoting Healthy Child Development

This organizing model allows you to:

- 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

Core Drivers for Successful Implementation

- Community and agency readiness
- Pre-service and in-service training
- 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

For More Information

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Thank You!

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