

Men and Children

A FORUM FOR ISSUES CONCERNING AND RELATING TO THE IMPORTANT ROLE MEN PLAY IN CHILDREN'S LIVES



Building Your Father Involvement Efforts One Step at a Time

by J. Michael Hall

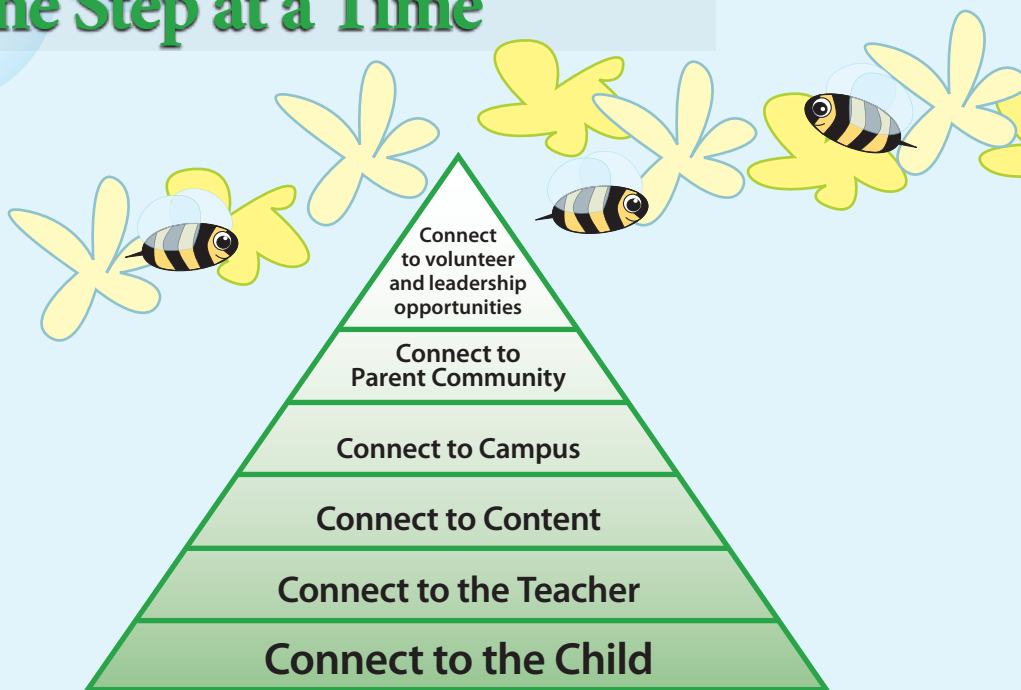


Head Start programs have worked with fathers over the past several years, and, as a result, we practitioners have begun to learn what has and has not worked for fathers and their children. From these successes and failures, we can now build father involvement practices that are more consistent at both the local and national level. In fact, it was with these years of experiences that my colleagues and I developed a model of thinking and planning for father involvement that allows programs to be effective and sustainable as they build a program step by step.

The father involvement pyramid

As a former middle school teacher, I learned long ago that models and organizers are great tools for learning. As such, our model for sustainable father involvement is represented here as a pyramid (see corresponding image) that is built one layer at a time, each layer building on the preceding one.

This pyramid illustrates that programs should begin with a strong foundation of efforts that get fathers actively involved in the lives and education of their children, and it proceeds in incremental steps to the pinnacle where fathers are basically leading themselves and providing volunteer leadership within a center, school, or other organization.



Building a strong foundation

Many programs hope to skip steps and start from the top, but those efforts almost always crumble away because they lack a solid foundation. Starting with volunteer efforts without having first established the foundation of what motivates sustainable volunteerism and program support, for instance, can backfire and cause fathers to turn away from subsequent opportunities for them to get involved.

The foundation: Connecting to the child

Fathers must be connected to the child in order to take on the role of responsible father involvement. Most practitioners understand that fathers are not always tuned into their children; this can be due to a wide variety of reasons including a lack of involvement with or access to their child. Many of our initial efforts in father involvement are motivated by the fact that fathers

are not well connected to their children. If fathers are not connected to their children, however, they will not be motivated to be a part of our efforts. Therefore, we need to start by establishing this connection before we can go any further. Our first efforts should be to provide programs and activities that provide ample opportunities for dads and their children to interact so that more and more connections can be established. By interacting with their child, fathers learn about their child's temperament, strengths, and abilities and are better able to support their child's development.

Connect to the classroom

As we begin our work to support and strengthen the bonds between fathers and their child, we can also begin to connect these fathers to the classroom — the primary place where their child learns and develops outside of the home. At Strong Fathers-Strong Families we suggest that

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centers start with our standard “Bring Your Dad to Head Start Day,” where the fathers eat breakfast with their child and then spend the first part of the morning observing and participating in the classroom while the child attends to learning tasks, participates in circle time, and does all of the great things that they do in a typically day. By having a working understanding of the various aspects of the classroom and the early childhood program, fathers are better able to help their child succeed in school. Discussion about learning objectives and curriculum goals will mean much more to a father if he has first experienced the classroom for himself.

Connect to the content

Head Start programs inform families of the content of the curriculum through parent meetings, letters and notes sent home, and daily interaction during drop-off and pick-up, but none of these efforts are as poignant as actually seeing the teacher and children in action. Being present in the classroom allows fathers to see children engaged in learning experiences and activities and to observe the teacher’s approach and dedication to the successful development of the children. Witnessing these things makes the meaning and value of education come alive. And once fathers understand the educational goals and expectations set for their child, they can then help their child meet these expectations and succeed in school.

Connect to the center

It is important that fathers understand the dynamics of the classroom. They should also have a sense of the overall center environment and how it does or does not support their child’s learning and development. By connecting to the center, fathers can become a powerful asset to their own child’s education and the education of other children and families in the community. However, programs that try to initiate parent involvement by asking fathers to first start volunteering their time at the center are often unsuccessful because they’ve neglected to create a meaningful connection. Once fathers genuinely understand the Head Start center’s role in their child’s life, they are much more likely to be motivated to participate in the program.

Connect to the parent community

As fathers work their way up the pyramid, they become more aware of both the needs and opportunities for themselves and others. As fathers become more involved with the Head Start community through the center, they can find themselves connecting with parents who have similar needs and desires for their children’s future. ➡

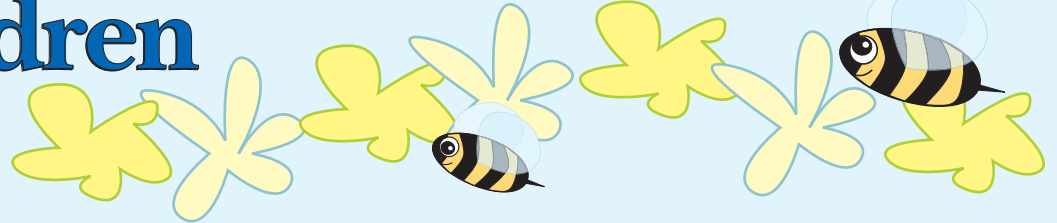
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Connect to volunteer and leadership opportunities

Many programs encourage fathers to volunteer at the center, but those efforts are usually ineffective until the fathers are authentically invested in the program through their connections with others (such as teachers, staff members, and other

parents) and also through their understanding of how their involvement affects their own child and the community in which they live. Once this has been established, the opportunities that are offered to fathers should be interactive, relational, and relevant. Dad's clubs, security programs,



service projects, and other opportunities must be structured to benefit the child and then the greater good. Adding more responsibilities to a father's life without any relevance will not benefit children or the community in the long run.

Working up the steps

As Head Start programs work to involve fathers, experience tells us that they should take it one step at a time along a continuum of services, opportunities, and expectations. Efforts involving fathers who are new to the program should focus on the foundational level, strengthening the father's connection with his child. By bringing fathers along incrementally, we are more likely to build effective, sustainable male involvement programs that lead to improved outcomes for children. **C&F**

J. Michael Hall, M.Ed., executive director of Strong Fathers-Strong Families, is the father of two sons and the husband to a wonderful third-grade teacher. He has worked as a special education teacher, a teacher of the gifted and talented, and an intermediate and middle school principal. After realizing that he was spending more time raising other people's children than his own, he left the principalship and soon became an advocate for stronger parent and father involvement in public education. As an educator, a speaker, and the founder of Strong Fathers-Strong Families, Hall has presented to more than 30,000 fathers and parents at local schools, Head Start centers, and regional and national conferences. Strong Fathers-Strong Families works with Head Start programs, public schools, churches, and other organizations to improve the educational environment so that men may become more involved in the lives of their children. Strong Fathers-Strong Families plans and facilitates events at the campus, organizational, and community level to bring men together with their children in the presence of other men to discover their true strength as fathers. To learn more, go to www.strongfathers.com.

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