

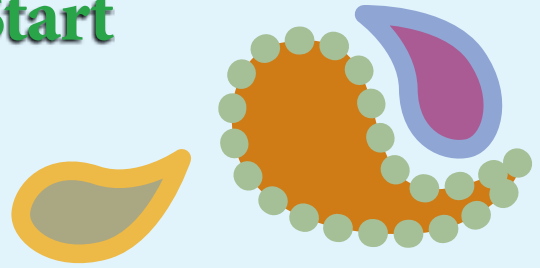
Men and Children

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



Reauthorizing Head Start Father Involvement

by J. Michael Hall



Over the past several years, there has been a great push to involve fathers in Head Start programs. I've been fortunate enough to have been involved in this work almost since it began as an initiative. During that time, I've seen — and been a part of — some great programs as well as a few misfires. While our past efforts were certainly noble and sincere, we need to continue to assess what we've been doing, what's worked, and where we can improve.

Changing our mentality

As we started working with fathers, we all knew that many men, particularly men in low-income environments, had some personal issues that needed to be addressed. Unemployment, criminal records, lack of education, and other concerns, led us to try to help men become better men. While this is a good endeavor, our focus on these concerns led us to build many of our fatherhood efforts from a deficit-based mentality. In other words, we felt like we had to completely “fix” a man before he could become a good father. Addressing the issues that can hinder a father's involvement should be part of the process, but not all of those issues are present in all of our Head Start fathers and not all of those issues keep men from helping their children. Many men have resisted our efforts because men, as a group, tend to be more competency-based and if you continue to tell a man what he is doing wrong, he will not stay around long enough for you tell him what he can do and is doing right.

It's time for us to re-focus our programs and create a strength-based model in which we spend most of our time working with men on what they should do or already do that benefit their children. I've found from my work with thousands of fathers that once we tell men what they can do for their children, they not only understand what they are doing right but they also become more motivated to change the deficits in their lives. Focusing heavily on deficits can be defeating and rarely motivates fathers to work on their strengths, however.

Changing our measurement

Typically when you ask Head Start grantees about their fatherhood programs, they im-

mediately begin talking about numbers and events. However, attendance numbers should not be our focal point. Our earliest efforts were about getting more and more men to attend, but once that became our goal, we lost our place in this work. By offering door prizes, trying to appeal to what we thought men wanted, and allowing our own bias to stereotype what men would and would not want to do, we built programs that focused on getting men to attend. Unfortunately, this was a great adventure in missing the point. Getting men to attend is easy. Just ask any business that is trying to appeal to men. When we entice men with “sports, tools, and barbecues” we may experience success in terms of attendance but not in terms of outcomes. Basketball tournaments, major

sporting events, door prizes, and mounds of food are not only unnecessary, these things do little to help men become better fathers. Fellowship is the easy part — it's father development that takes some work.

We must begin to develop fatherhood program goals that can be measured in terms of child outcomes. While I think it is noble to help men become better men and I think fun events are terrific, Head Start's mission isn't going to be accomplished by primarily focusing on attracting or helping men. The primary focus needs to be on improving child outcomes, period. Head Start programs do a great job of strengthening families and helping parents and other caregivers acquire important skills. But the fundamental purpose behind those efforts is to improve child outcomes. If we are helping men find employment or develop job skills, it should be as a way of improving child outcomes. If our father involvement efforts are not helping children cognitively, behaviorally, or socially, we need to change our efforts. This can be difficult — particularly considering the many challenges a lot of these fathers face. However, we must stay true to Head Start's mission in all of our efforts. Father involvement is not an exception.

Changing our methods

As we've seen over the past 10 years, the families in Head Start are becoming increasingly diverse. Many programs are doing an outstanding job of weaving all of the cultures and ethnicities into the fabric of Head Start. We must make sure that



we're also doing the same with our father involvement efforts.

Through my work, I've concluded that programs must have separate, stand-alone father-child programs in order to work with fathers. Initially, family and parent programs are attended almost exclusively by mothers. By having father-specific programs, we have more men attend and we can then work with them in a more effective manner. These father-specific programs should not only have positive child outcomes as their goal but must also be structured in a way that helps weave men and fathers back into the regular fabric of the Head Start program. We need the entire family to support their children and their outcomes.

I've seen many programs that have been very successful with their father involvement efforts, but then they either begin to focus almost all of their resources and efforts on fathers, inadvertently ne- ➔

What do we do?

I am always being asked the same questions during father involvement workshops:

- How do we get fathers to attend?
- What do we do with them once we get them?
- How do we keep them?

Here is what we've found works in Head Start.

How do we get fathers?

Use the children to help you attract fathers.

The best way to involve fathers in the lives of the children is to involve them in the lives of their children. Everything that we do with fathers is a father-child event. All of your activities should be focused on building a stronger relationship between the father and the child. By making it a "kid event," the children will do most of your promotional work and the fathers are more apt to attend if they know they'll be spending time with their child.

Give them time.

Fathers need advance notice so they can schedule time off from work and make other arrangements. We suggest giving at least one month's notice to inform fathers of an upcoming event and then providing them with all of the information they need (date, time, location, and so on) two weeks before the event. The day before a morning event, we also place stickers on every child as they leave for the day to remind fathers and mothers of the event. We've found that fathers will attend if we communicate well with them.



What do we do with fathers?

Focus on fun.

Anyone who's attended a Strong Fathers-Strong Families fatherhood training knows that we believe in fun! We also have the following three the three rules for effective father involvement programs. Programs must be...

- 1. Interactive:** Interactive between the father and child and between all of the fathers in attendance.
- 2. Relational:** Fathers need to be able to relate to their child and other fathers.
- 3. Relevant:** Because they are fathers, they have limited time and resources. Do not waste either. Make sure that your event has a clear purpose and provides information that helps a man be a better father.

Speak to them as men and fathers.

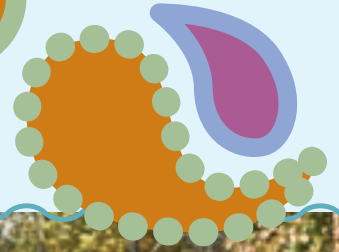
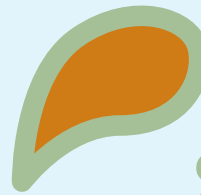
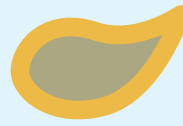
When a father attends a father involvement program with their child, they're there because they love their child, they want to learn more about being a father or more about their own child, or they attend out of duty. Celebrate all of those reasons and then work with them. Many men have never had anyone recognize and talk to them about their value; often just by telling them, they can make great strides in their efforts to be more involved.

How do we keep them?

Remain focused on the child.

Men attend programs because their children invite them. They attend programs because they feel safe and honored for their efforts (not their perfection). By always staying focused on child outcomes, your fathers will see the purpose in attending and participating. Be careful not to veer into "repair mode" where you begin to stray back into a deficit model.

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glecting the mothers, or they do not try to bring the fathers into “regular” Head Start programming (parent meetings, policy councils, and so on). Programs should keep in mind that a major goal of father involvement should be to better involve fathers in all aspects of the Head Start program.

I’ve seen what can be accomplished for children when father involvement programs are strength-based, focused on outcome, and planned with the bigger picture of whole family involvement in mind. Because of the incredibly positive outcomes that can result, this work must be done — and it must be done using the most effective and successful strategies. We’ve learned a lot of important lessons along the way and we’ve affected a lot of young lives, so let’s continue to improve on those efforts. **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 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, speaker and founder of Strong Fathers-Strong Families, he has presented to more than 30,000 fathers and parents at local schools, Head Starts, 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 in order 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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