



# Learning Tool 10



## Promoting Father Involvement in Early Childhood

### Overview

Over the last decade, there has been a growing awareness of the role that fathers can play to support children in their early years of development. Those administering early childhood education programs have begun to reach out to parents for the specific purpose of promoting father involvement and leadership. Head Start programs have been a national model for parent involvement in early education and development and are now a national leader in linking father involvement to early childhood development and education. The following recommendations and ideas have emerged from the Head Start experience.

### General Recommendations

- > Support parents as primary educators, nurturers, and advocates for their children.
- > Provide every parent with opportunities for a significant experience in the program.
- > Ensure that parents are involved in making policy and program decisions related to the program.
- > Make special efforts to reach out to and develop programming that meets the needs of fathers, supportive male family members, and other male caregivers.

### Targeting and Reaching Out to Fathers

- > Review your program's commitment to male involvement and the policies, procedures, strategies, and activities that support it. Distinguish between practices that encourage men to participate in general activities that support the program and those that involve fathers in the development of decisions about their children. Ask whether parent involvement in your program means "mom" involvement or "mom-and-dad" involvement. And determine what you need to do to support and promote both parents' involvement.
- > "Parent involvement" should include fathers or the supportive men in children's lives. These men must be valued as nurturing partners with mothers,

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This article was adapted from *A Head Start Handbook of Parent Involvement : Vision And Strategies*

not just as the people who do work around the Head Start center. Each program needs to find a mix of opportunities, interests, schedules, and personalities that can promote male involvement with the children.

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- > Establish an enrollment policy that, for each child enrolled, requests the father's name, address, and other relevant information. If he is not available, or the mother does not feel comfortable naming him, determine if the mother is comfortable with providing contact information for a supportive male family member or friend who is involved in the child's life.
- > Hold a special orientation event for fathers or significant men in children's and families' lives. Ask them for ideas about how they would like to participate, what might interfere, and how you can support them. In addition, discuss the importance of male participation in children's lives and suggest specific child development activities in which they can be involved.

### Parent Involvement Strategies

- > Develop and implement strategies that encourage and support each parent in trying out different opportunities to participate until the right ones "click."
- > Make sure that at least one staff person gets to know each parent and helps that person figure out what opportunities fit best with his or her individual personality, interests, and goals.
- > Provide opportunities for participation that accommodate parents' varying needs and "catch" parents when they interact with various parts of the program.

- > Review hiring practices to be sure they support the hiring of staff members who reflect the diversity of the families in the program. This might include hiring parents, staff that reflect the linguistic and cultural composition of families involved in the program, men and women, and people with disabilities.
- > Develop ways to involve parents and staff in the identification of families or communities that have not been adequately supported, such as migrant families, homeless families, fathers and male partners, grandparents, teen parents, and parents of children with disabilities.
- > Continue to assess whether you provide a variety of opportunities for parents to work with their children in developmentally appropriate learning activities and whether you make a special effort to reach out to fathers and other supportive males.

### Parent Engagement Activities

- > Establish a "parent room." Think of a space, furnishings, and resources that would interest men as well as women.
- > Plan orientation activities that take place in a room set aside specifically for parents.
- > Create opportunities for small group discussions that include both experienced and new parents. Think of ways to involve men as well as women in these small groups.
- > Work with staff and parents to develop a list of at least 20 different ways that parents can volunteer in the program to support their children's development. Make sure the list covers a variety of activities, including one-time events and those that do not demand much time and energy; those that are culturally relevant; those of special interest to fathers, grandfathers, or male caregivers; and those that contribute to a variety of program decisions concerning children.
- > Conduct health screenings and establish a specific role and responsibility for each child's parents to carry out. Share your thoughts about why

mothers' and fathers' participation in the screenings is important.

- > Celebrate cultural and family strengths by involving Head Start families in educational and celebratory programming about their various cultures. These type of activities can increase understanding and trust between Head Start staff and family members, including fathers; increase parenting skills; increase family awareness of community resources; and help families set goals and plan for their children's futures.
- > Hold a bartering party. Be sure to consider needs and bartering ideas that appeal to men, people with disabilities, and families of varying cultures. Plan the party so that there is time to mingle and identify bartering opportunities for goods and services.
- > Ask a local fitness club or physical fitness expert to conduct a clinic about fitness activities that parents can do at home. Make sure you have both male and female fitness experts.
- > Talk with each parent of a child with a disability to assess what he or she know about IEPs and to identify any concerns he or she might have about the process. Be sure to include in the discussion fathers or supportive men who are involved with the disabled child. Ask parents if they would be interested in a practice session for developing an IEP. Contact the parents of each child with a disability (remember to include fathers) and invite them to the practice session.
- > Make a special effort to find out how your program can provide opportunities for parents whose involvement may be more of a challenge, such as those who are working, those who are in education or training programs, those with disabilities or who have children with disabilities, and under-

involved fathers. Conduct a survey by telephone, home visit, or other face-to-face interaction to find out what your program might do to facilitate their participation.

- > Develop a buddy system that pairs more experienced parents with newer parents. Ask the more experienced buddy to assume the responsibility to help the newer one feel welcome, informed, and able to participate. This might include helping him or her get to meetings, coaching him or her on processes and procedures, and helping him or her identify and join subcommittees that might be of interest.

Hold a bartering party, with bartering possibilities that appeal to men, people with disabilities, and families of varying cultures.

- > Let parents know about organizations or groups in their community with which they might want to become involved. These could include official advisory boards of the city or county, ad hoc groups working on issues of interest to the community, parent-teacher associations, community improvement groups, neighborhood block committees, etc. This could be a good approach for involving fathers who might be interested in improving job skills or who have an interest in recreational or community activities.
- > Ask parents individually (including fathers) to identify one or more community services, resources, or activities they want to continue after leaving the program.



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