

Fathers for Life

Strengthening Families and Fatherhood: Children of Fathers in the Criminal Justice System

Section 1: Introduction - Fathers for Life Overview

In 2005, the Office of Head Start funded an Innovation and Improvement Project (IIP) designed to strengthen and support low-income families in Missouri with children whose fathers were under the supervision of the Department of Corrections. The emergent model of Fathers for Life partnered Head Start with a wide array of state and local agencies and organizations to identify and engage offender and ex-offender fathers of young children and their families.

Project Overview

The overall goal of Fathers for Life is to strengthen low-income families with children that have fathers who are incarcerated, on probation or on parole. Desired outcomes are to (1) increase parenting education and support for fathers; (2) increase fathers' access to employment and job-training opportunities; (3) improve the relationships between mothers and fathers of young children; and (4) improve training for professionals who work with families.

Fathers for Life focuses on:

- Establishing and maintaining healthy father-child relationships while the father is incarcerated and after re-entry into the community;
- Providing parenting resources, supports, and training during incarceration and after re-entry;
- Offering training and resource development for staff in Head Start, probation and parole officers, child support service workers, and other professions working with children of incarcerated fathers;
- Supporting custodial/non-custodial parents in communicating and interacting with each other more effectively;
- Referring more target children to local Head Start programs;
- Offering enrolled children and their families support such as workshops to improve family relationships through mediation, parenting education, parenting education opportunities specifically for fathers, and enhanced career support;
- Providing training and resources to Head Start teachers, family service workers, and other professionals about the challenges faced by these families and how to address their needs; and
- Supplying Head Start programs with additional materials, such as children's books to help children cope with having an incarcerated parent.

While Missouri's project specifically focused on offender and ex-offender fathers of young children, experiences in participating Head Start programs indicate that program resources and support are appropriate for all fathers of young children. Marketing Fathers for Life to all fathers

can strengthen the relationship between fathers and their young children, including those supervised by probation and parole.

Background Information

Parental incarceration is an issue often faced by children and families involved in Head Start. During the planning phase of this project, 10 percent of the 18,628 children enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start in Missouri had an incarcerated parent, with an even higher percentage having a parent on probation or parole.

Children of incarcerated parents are at higher risk than other children for poverty, school failure and truancy, parental addictions, inconsistent parenting, and the absence of reciprocal emotional relationships with available caring adults (Farrington & West, 1993). Children of offenders are seven times more likely than their peers to become involved with the criminal justice system as juveniles or adults (Jacobson, 2003). A recent study found that of inmate respondents, 41 percent of their fathers had been incarcerated (Brown & Ramirez, 2008). Nationally, 50 percent of juvenile delinquent children have a parent who is or has been incarcerated (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1993 Report).

Along with the direct impact on children, incarceration also disrupts the functioning of an entire family. For example, since 44 percent of fathers in state and federal prisons had lived with their children prior to incarceration, the children experienced major household transitions upon the incarceration of their father (e.g. single-parent household, foster care, kinship care) (Mumola, 2000). This disruption often results in loss of income or support for the child, contributing to family poverty in homes where the father is absent, children are five times more likely to be poor (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2001).

Children of incarcerated fathers are distinctly affected by the physical absence of a father figure in their daily lives. Incarceration causes a significant sense of loss both for prisoners and all family members, denying them the ongoing interactions that contribute to sustained and intimate relationships.

Importance of Fatherhood

Various responsible fatherhood movements have aimed to encourage fathers to play a central role in supporting and caring for their families (Fagan, 1997). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PROWA) has four objectives for promoting responsible fatherhood:

- (1) Increase child support enforcement and paternity establishment;
- (2) Eliminate barriers to employment;
- (3) Reduce the number of out-of-wedlock births; and
- (4) Increase access and visitation rights for non-custodial parents (Bernard, 1998).

However, such strategies may not work for “fragile families” formed by unmarried, disadvantaged parents (Levine & Pitt, 1996; Mincy & Pouncy, 1997; Palm, 1997). In particular,

the impact of the father's unemployment on the family and the lack of encouragement from service agencies for fathers to be involved contribute to the continued failures in this area (Cohen, 1993; Mincy & Pouncy, 1997). Underemployment and unemployment may represent the most significant barriers to fathers' child support, but also the greatest opportunity for focus in future program designs (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Dubey, 1995; Bartfield & Meyer, 1994; Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992; Gershuny, 1994).

Obstacles to father involvement include a strained relationship with the child's mother and biases of schools, hospitals, and social service agencies (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Marsiglio, 1993; Spoth & Redmond, 1995). To improve father involvement:

- The equal contributions of mothers and fathers should be recognized, as well as their ability to work cooperatively and self-sufficiently to meet their children's needs;
- Responsible non-custodial fathers should be given the chance to interact meaningfully with their children, despite their inability to contribute financially; and
- Parents should be provided with culturally sensitive resources for working through conflicts while eliminating stereotypes that degrade low-income persons (Harris, 1997).

The Fathers for Life Model

Fathers for Life is modeled on a previous initiative designed to help incarcerated fathers support their young children (Fuger, Stanfill, Todd, & Brown, 2003; Fuger & Abel, 2008). The Head Start-sponsored initiative adds a focus on responsible fatherhood once men re-enter their communities, and seeks to address adverse circumstances of children and families both during and after incarceration (Fuger & Abel, 2008).

Importance of Collaboration

Collaboration is often the key to creating effective and sustained systems change within a state and/or community. Collaboration creates the opportunity for a group of otherwise unrelated groups and agencies to work toward a common goal. A diverse and comprehensive coalition can succeed in creating policy, increasing public knowledge, creating a network, and developing innovative solutions to complex problems. Recognizing the importance of collaboration, many statewide agencies are actively involved in Fathers for Life. In addition, the initiative has community-based steering committees to help communities decide how to tailor the project to needs. Community development tools are included with this manual.

Families of children enrolled in Head Start who have an incarcerated father or a father under supervision of the criminal justice system can benefit from the many services offered through Fathers for Life. Many of this project's interventions can be absorbed into the culture of Head Start programs and other partner agencies, becoming an integrated part of how communities serve not only offender and ex-offender fathers with young children, but all fathers.

The Fathers for Life Model evolved from the interaction of groups at the state, community, and direct service levels. A broad base of partners at each of these three levels, committed to better outcomes

for young children, strengthens the model. At each of the three levels, administrative leadership, team leadership, and a network of service providers should work to fulfill important functions. The chart below illustrates the model's structure and identifies the partnering groups associated with their respective responsibilities.

| Functions at the State Level | Partnering Groups at the State Level |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative leadership | Lead agency |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team leadership | State steering committee and executive steering committee |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network of service providers | Curriculum reviewers and developers |
| Functions at the Community Level | Partnering Groups at the Community Level |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative leadership | Local Head Start grantee |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team leadership | Local stakeholder team |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network of service providers | Facilitator trainers |
| Functions at the Direct Service Level | Partnering Groups at the Direct Service Level |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative leadership | Fathers for Life coordinator and/or service coordinator |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team leadership | Coordinated team of service providers |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network of service providers | Parent educators, support group leaders, mediators, teachers |

The State Level: The key features of the Fathers for Life model at the state level are:

- State leadership;
- The state steering committee;
- A communications plan for interaction among agencies and within agencies;
- Product development;
- Public awareness; and
- Capacity building through training and technical assistance for facilitators and staff.

The Missouri Department of Social Services Family Support Division provided administrative leadership of the state-level pilot project, but the Head Start State Collaboration Office or the Head Start Association of a given state is likely to fill this leadership role in replicating the Fathers for Life model. Just as in the pilot project, a state steering committee guides implementation. The primary service delivered at the state level is curriculum review, development, and training. Parents as Teachers National Center, the Missouri Association of Community Action, and the University of Missouri Extension filled key roles in developing or adapting the Fathers for Life curricula. For states replicating this model, service providers will review Fathers for Life curricula and other resources to select those that fit the circumstances of families in their state.

The Community Level: Program components at the community level include:

- Leadership from the local Head Start organization;
- Local team development; and
- Local capacity building through professional development training.

In developing Fathers for Life, Head Start grantees filled the administrative role at the community level, which is recommended for other communities using this model. Under the leadership of Head Start agencies, local stakeholder teams form and meet to coordinate their efforts for providing interventions to fathers in the criminal justice system and their families. To some degree, the stakeholder team composition mirrors that of the state steering committee to include representation from Head Start, corrections, probation and parole, workforce development, family support and child welfare, parent educators, faith-based programs, and private business. The breadth of the stakeholder team is enhanced when both the local Head Start agency and partners at the state level suggest potential members. Stakeholder team meetings and cross-training opportunities give agency personnel a new understanding of the work of other community agencies serving this population and the basis for developing creative community solutions.

During the pilot stage, facilitator trainers provided training and support for Fathers for Life activity leaders. Additionally, training on collaboration across agencies, the importance of fatherhood, the needs of children, and the effective use of classroom materials enhances the community's ability to respond to the issues. These Fathers for Life resources for professionals working with fathers, families, and children are now accessible through individual or group self-study:

- Working Collaboratively for Families
- Understanding Children's Needs
- Sharing Special Topic Books with Children
- Dads Matter

The Direct Service Level: These roles are associated with actual provision of direct services to fathers and their families:

- Coordinating services for fathers and families;
- Building a support team for each father; and
- Building capacity through training and support for fathers and other family members; delivered by a network of teachers, trainers, and other practitioners.

In the pilot program, Fathers for Life coordinators or other service coordinators provided leadership by integrating services for fathers in the criminal justice system, their children, and families. Wise selection of the agencies and individuals to fill this leadership role increases the likelihood of fathers' success. Service coordinators cultivate trusting relationships – not only with fathers and families, but also with probation and parole officers, teachers, and other community service providers who function as a support team for each father and family.

Cross-training sessions for family support, probation and parole, and Head Start personnel promote a shared understanding of the work and professional relationships across agencies. This builds the network of available service providers who refer fathers and families to the services they need.

All of these components culminate in the actual training and support for fathers in the criminal justice system and their young children and families. These key activities discussed in this manual comprise the Fathers for Life interventions for fathers and families. The Fathers for Life model consists of five core curriculum areas:

- **Parent Education and Support Sessions**
 - Proud Parent
 - 24/7 Dad™
 - Focus on Fathering
 - Parents as Teachers Individual Parent Coaching
 - Parenting Apart
 - Relationship Enrichment Skills
- **Employment Support**
- **Family Mediation**
- **Child Support Debt Waivers**
- **Literature and Materials for Children in Head Start Classrooms**

During the development of the Fathers for Life project in Missouri, stakeholders documented these lessons learned:

- A statewide approach that allowed flexibility at the local level builds both structural integrity and adaptability to accommodate state and community circumstances.
- A tiered approach to implement the model with gradual reduction of project support maximizes the use of resources and promotes sustainable solutions beyond the grant funding.
- The structures and values of Head Start are consistent with the Fathers for Life model; both hold a strengths-based view of the child in context of family and community. Building the model into Head Start structures strengthens the potential for sustainability and replication.
- Building on the partnerships and resources of previous successful initiatives propels this project forward.

Information from the evaluation assisted in the creation of a Missouri profile. This profile served as a useful example to assist personnel from other states interested in applying the model. The Fathers for Life Technical Assistance Manual provides the tools and resources necessary to adapt and implement the Fathers for Life model as a statewide initiative and/or as a local community initiative. Included in the manual are resources to assist Head Start agencies and their partners with public awareness, community development, staffing, and intake. The manual also includes resources to assist with the implementation of Fathers for Life activities.