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Working with Fathers...Understanding Social Support for Fatherhood

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Social support for parenting is a complex concept (Cleary, 1988). It includes the informal social networks that provide parents with encouragement, material goods, occasional respite, information, practical tips, empathy and reassurance. The informal system often includes spouses, extended family members, friends and neighbors. The formal support network on the other hand consists of educators, health care providers, social service agencies and children care providers. This community system provides information on child development, advice on specific problems, opportunities to learn new communication and discipline skills and education and care for children. Social support for families depends upon the parents' abilities to establish an informal network and the richness of the formal support network that has been constructed by social institutions in the community. It is assumed that all parents need and benefit from many different types of support to effectively raise children today.

Most of the research literature on support appears to focus on family support and support for mothers (Cleary, 1988). It appears that mothers tend to construct and maintain the informal webs of support around parenting issues. This pattern is based on two important factors:

- women have taken on the role of managing parenting functions for the family and in many cases have more time to devote to this task.
- women have been socialized to value and make social connections and have developed the requisite skills for both giving and receiving support (Tannen, 1991).

Connections with other parents are seen as important by mothers and provide emotional support for the difficult task of parenting. Mothers also tend to manage the connections to formal systems that support parenthood by planning and attending appointments, going to parenting classes and enrolling children in various programs. Fathers benefit from these support systems that mothers have constructed for their families in a number of obvious ways. This pattern helps to explain the relative lack of interest in developing social support for themselves or their families. The need for social support by fathers has also been lessened when the breadwinner role is seen as the primary function of fathers.

The changes in family systems during the last 25 years lead us to reassess the need for support systems for fathers. Spouses and extended family members could fulfill many of the support functions for men as fathers in the past. These systems have been weakened by social change (Blankenhorn, 1995) that leaves many fathers disconnected from their children and their children's mothers. Even when fathers are living in "nuclear families," mothers typically work and family roles have shifted. Fathers are taking on additional responsibilities for childrearing which require new and different kinds of support.

The current issues around fathers and social support have resulted from the increasing need for support for fatherhood and continued male socialization towards being independent and competent outside the family realm. This socialization pattern has continued to give males the message that getting support for parenting is a sign of weakness (I can't do it on my own) or incompetence (I don't

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know how to do it). This is often reflected by male discounting of the parenting role — skills, knowledge and energy required to be a good parent. Many men want to claim the role of co-parent while investing less than spouses in the parental role. The barriers to men obtaining support for fatherhood extend beyond themselves into the social environment of the community. There are a limited number of formal support systems that offer information, encouragement and advice about fatherhood. The combination of internal and external barriers leaves many men confused and uncertain. If they overcome internal barriers to reach out for support, there are few places to extend a helping hand to men as parents.

The lesson plan that follows is one way to begin this exploration with men in our programs.

Learner Outcomes:
- Fathers will examine own support systems that help them to be good dads.
- Fathers will identify the formal support systems for parenting in their communities that are "father friendly,".
- Fathers will understand the internal and external barriers that may stop them from obtaining support.
- Fathers will recognize own need for support and possible strategies for creating a stronger support system.

I. Introduction — Go around group and ask about the first year of parenting and who was the most support besides spouse? How did they support you?
  A. Overview and goals
      1. How does the idea of support for fatherhood fit with male socialization to be tough and independent. The image of men as a strong individual who could deal with problems on his own — the strong, silent stereotype-rugged individual still lingers.
      2. Research findings about support and fatherhood to consider:
         a. 1987 survey of 80 men in St. Cloud, MN, identified support as the least important goal out of a list of several goals for parent education for fathers. (Johnson & Palm, 1992)
         b. Men who have a larger male support system tend to spend less time with their children. (Riley, 1993)
         c. Male expression of support may come out as problem-solving; female support as listening and connecting with feelings. (Tannen, 1990)

II. What does support mean to you as a father?
  A. Brainstorm definitions of support as a group and write down responses.
      1. Mention the difference between formal and informal support.
      2. Include emotional, financial and information support.
  B. Mini-lecture of factors that make support for fathers more critical.
    (Include the following ideas and ask fathers to add to this list.)
      1. Increasing number of fathers not living with their children around 40% (Blankenhorn, 1995) creates limited access to children. Fathers may need more information and support to manage more complex family situations.
      2. Increasing family responsibility for child-rearing due to increasing number of mothers at work outside the home and sharing the breadwinning role.
      3. Interest of men in improving their relationships with their children.
      4. Other ideas from the group.

III. Barriers to Men asking for Support for the Father role.

A. Exercise on *Internal and External Barriers to Seeking Support*. In small groups use the barriers handout (#1) to define the internal socialization messages that make men reluctant to seek support for parenting. In addition, ask dads to identify the external factors (e.g., lack of time, service unavailability, lack of information about formal support, etc.) that make seeking support outside the nuclear family difficult.

B. As a large group, process the lists of barriers.

IV. Understanding Personal Support Systems

A. Ask fathers to complete the *Inventory of Support Resources for Fathers* (Handout #2)

B. In pairs talk about current supports for parenting, discussing
   1. Where does support come from for you? for spouse?
   2. How much support for parenting do you get from men versus women?
   3. What areas would you want more support for parenting?

C. Process as a large group and discuss where support comes from and what support needs were expressed.

D. Discussion Questions:
   1. How are fathers' and mothers' needs for support different?
   2. Do men have different ways of getting and giving support?
   3. Do female models of support systems/groups work for men?

V. Creating Support Systems for Fathers

A. What are formal sources of support for fatherhood in our community? Ask large group to brainstorm a list and record.

B. What services would you like to see in the community for fathers?

C. Think about possible untapped sources of support for self. Ask group to share ideas.

VI. Summary and Closure

A. Support is not equal to weakness

B. Both individual and community support systems are important to be the best dads you can be.

C. We have a responsibility to both give and be open to receiving support for parenting from a variety of sources including other men.

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Internal and External Barriers to Seeking Support for Fathering

A. List of *Internal Socialization Messages* about being male that get in the way of asking for support to be a good father.

1.

2.

3.

4.

B. List of *External Barriers* (external factors such as time, services unavailable, etc.) that get in the way of fathers getting support for parenting.

1.

2.

3.

4.

Inventory of Support Resources for Fathers

List 1-4 sources of support that you use on a regular basis to meet the different support needs listed.

Information on parenting

-
-
-
-

Encouragement to be a good dad

-
-
-
-

Listens and shares experiences of fathering

-
-
-
-

Back-up person to call for child care

-
-
-
-

Advice on parenting problems

-
-
-
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FAMILY INFORMATION SERVICES