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Man Up: Integrating Fatherhood and Community Engagement

Armon R. Perry

Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increase in programs designed to promote involved and responsible fatherhood. While the literature provides insight into how existing organizations serving fathers can improve the quality of their service delivery, little is known about starting a fatherhood program from the ground up. This article contributes to the needed discussion on such programs by exploring the development of the Man Up fatherhood program. Featured in this discussion is Man Up's program development model, which combines parent education and community engagement events and activities and engages fathers at a level that transcends their involvement as program participants or research subjects. Engaging and promoting responsible fatherhood through community events is one of the ways that distinguishes Man Up from other fatherhood programs.

Introduction

In the past 20 years, there has been an increase in the number of organizations promoting and implementing fatherhood programs. Much of the increase is related to increased scholarship on fatherhood, advocacy from organizations such as the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), and developments in public policy. Recent examples include the Parent's Fair Share Program of the Family Support Act of 1988 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, both of which included provisions for states to develop fatherhood demonstration programs. Since then, funding for fatherhood programs has been a regular part of the domestic agenda. In 2002, the Bush administration authorized \$320 million for fatherhood programs (Bronte-Tinkew, Bowie, & Moore, 2007). Most recently, President Obama has discussed the important role that engaged and committed fathers play in the positive growth and development of strong children, families, and communities (The White House, 2009).

Despite the proliferation of fatherhood programs, the research literature is consistent in its conclusion that many of these programs yield mixed results (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007; Horn, 2003). However, there is some evidence that these programs can produce positive outcomes such as improved child development (Sarkadia, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008; Strug & Wilmore-Schaffer, 2003); increases in visitation days and child support paid (Fischer, 2002); and increased conflict resolution skills for fathers (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002). Moreover, fathers' participation in programs has also been associated with increased birth weight among

infants (Barth, Claycomb, & Loomis, 1988), increased empathy for children among fathers (Kissman, 2001), and improved psychological adjustment for children (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). These positive findings have contributed to the development of literature on the best practices of fatherhood programs. Specifically, these practices call for early intervention (Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2008), staff buy-in, the use of empirically supported theory-based approaches (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, & Metz, 2008), and providing fathers with concrete knowledge, tangible incentives, and flexible scheduling (Bagner & Eyber, 2003; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007).

While the literature provides insight into how existing programs serving fathers can improve the quality of their service delivery, little is known about starting a fatherhood program from the ground up.

The purpose of this article is to discuss and assess the development of the Man Up fatherhood program. Included in this discussion is a description of Man Up's program development model, which combines parent education and community engagement events and activities to engage fathers at a level that transcends their involvement as program participants or research subjects. This article also distinguishes the Man Up fatherhood program from several other documented fatherhood programs.

Literature Review

Fatherhood programs are as varied and diverse as the men they serve. The literature documents programs that serve fathers from many different backgrounds, ages, marital statuses, resident

statuses, and in an array of formats. For example, many fatherhood programs feature psycho-educational group formats (Fagan, 2008), while others provide therapeutic interventions (Gearing, Colvin, Popova, & Regehr, 2008). Programs offer a range of services aimed at addressing many fatherhood related issues such as enhancing parenting skills (Kissman, 2001), increasing child support compliance (Anderson et al., 2002; Bloomers, Sipe, & Ruedt, 2002), and advocating for fathers' visitation rights (Fischer, 2002). While many traditional programs are agency-based programs that make use of curriculum manuals that are followed rigidly to ensure fidelity and adherence to recommended parenting practices, there are programs that feature alternative delivery methods and utilize technology creatively to reach fathers. Specifically, although the Supporting Father Involvement program is guided by a curriculum manual, it does not prescribe parenting behaviors. Rather, it focuses on creating safe environments in which participants can discover new ways to address family problems that are consistent with their values and cultures (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007). Moreover, the New Fathers Network is a web-based discussion board and support group for fathers (Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Fleck, Elek, & Shipman, 2003) and the DADS Family Project offers its parenting skills group sessions in either face-to-face or distance video conferencing formats (Cornille, Barlow, & Cleveland, 2005).

It is clear from the literature that fatherhood programs come in all shapes and sizes. However, there are a few programs that have been recognized for their innovation and effectiveness. In a recent practice brief published by the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, and Metz (2008) identified eight specific programs as model programs. Following are the criteria used to identify the model programs, as well as brief descriptions of each:

1. The program had to have been experimentally evaluated.
2. The program had to have a sample size of over 30 in both the treatment and control group.
3. The program had to have retained at least 60 percent of its original sample.
4. The program had to have at least one outcome that was positively changed by 10 percent.
5. The program had to have at least one outcome with a substantial effect size statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
6. The program had to have been evaluated by

an independent evaluator with publicly available evaluation results.

Model Fatherhood Programs

The first of the model programs is the Dads for Life program (Cookston, Braver, Griffin, DeLuse, & Miles, 2007). This program is a preventive intervention designed to modify mothers' and fathers' perceptions of coparenting and interparental conflict after divorce. The target population for this program is divorced, noncustodial fathers working to decrease coparent conflict and to improve their relationships with their children by improving their parenting skills. Fathers are identified and recruited through divorce and child support court records. The program consists of eight group sessions that last an hour and 45 minutes each and two one-on-one sessions that last 45 minutes each. The content for the group sessions comes from videos and a program curriculum manual.

The Family Transition Program (FTP) was a demonstration project designed to test the effects of placing time limits on public assistance benefits before Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) transitioned into Temporary Aid to Needy Families (Bloom et al., 2000). The goals of the 6-year project were to increase participants' employment and income and to reduce the number of people on public assistance. The vast majority of program participants were single mothers who were randomly assigned to either the FTP or the control group receiving standard AFDC benefits. Those assigned to the FTP were subject to time limits on their public assistance benefits but were allowed to maintain more of their income and private assets without affecting their eligibility. They were also provided with increased child care assistance for leaving public assistance. Although this program was identified as a model fatherhood program, it featured no services for fathers. Rather, the fatherhood component of the program consisted of the single mother program participants being assigned child support enforcement case workers to make collection efforts more effective and efficient.

The Parenting Together Program is a group educational intervention designed to enhance the frequency and quality of fathers' involvement with their children during the transition to parenthood (Doherty, Erickson, & LaRossa, 2006). The target population, adult co-resident (i.e., married or cohabitating) expectant first time fathers, is recruited from health maintenance clinics. The program consists of eight total sessions, which

start during the second trimester and end two to five months post birth. The first session is individualized and the other seven sessions are group sessions led by two co-facilitators guided by a curriculum manual, mini-lectures, group discussions, videotapes, skill demonstrations, and role plays.

The Parents' Education about Children's Emotions program is a court-ordered program for parents seeking a divorce decree (McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1999). The program is designed to improve children's post divorce adjustment by helping parents understand the ways divorce affects children and how parents' conduct toward each other affects children's adjustment. The intervention is a one-time, 2.5 hour group session that utilizes program handbooks covering parenting skills, child development, and perceiving family dynamics from the child's perspective. In addition to the program handbooks, participants also engage in videos and role plays.

The Preparing for the Drug Free Years program is a curriculum-based preventive intervention designed to empower the parents of 8-14 year old children at risk for drug and alcohol abuse (Haggerty, Kosterman, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999). The program recruits parents through the public school system. They participate in five group sessions that last for two hours each. The program is implemented by experienced co-facilitators and makes use of a curriculum manual, videos, and a family activity workbook. All program content focuses on ways to enhance children's bonds with family, school, and peers by addressing topics such as family meetings, expectations, refusal skills, handling conflict, and developing bonds to reduce the likelihood that children will abuse drugs and alcohol.

The Fairfax County Fatherhood Program for Incarcerated Dads targets recently incarcerated fathers and is designed to promote responsible fatherhood during and after release from incarceration (Robbers, 2005). The program is voluntary and consists of 10 weekly group sessions lasting 90 minutes each. The program features a curriculum that emphasizes parenting skills, positive communication, and minimizing parental conflict. Participation in the program also requires contact between fathers and their children so that the fathers can begin to apply the skills that they develop within the program.

The Video Self-modeling Parent Education program uses videotaped self modeling to help fathers increase their parenting skills (Magill-Evans, Harrison, Benzies, Gierl, & Kimack, 2007).

The program targets co-resident, first-time fathers and focuses on parenting skills related to fathers' recognition of and ability to respond to their infants' behavioral cues. Fathers receive four home visits that last one hour each. The visits occur at baseline and again five, six, and eight months later. These home visits are conducted by trained home visitors who record fathers' interactions with their infants and provide them with constructive feedback that affirms their parenting strengths and instruction on how to address their parenting challenges.

The Young Dads program was designed as an intervention targeting first-time, adolescent fathers recruited through their female partners' participation in a mothers' support group (Mazza, 2002). The program was designed to enhance the young fathers' parenting skills, as well as their life skills and decision making skills. The 6-month program consisted of bi-weekly group parenting classes and weekly appointments with social workers who provided case management services aimed at increasing the fathers' social and economic capital so that they could be better positioned to maintain their involvement with their child. Specifically, through their social work case manager, program participants were provided with services and referrals for vocational training, medical care, and housing assistance.

Although there is no doubt that these programs have successfully served many fathers and extended our knowledge, they each have limitations. First, several of the programs targeted and only recruited co-resident fathers or fathers who had been legally married, but were later divorced or seeking a divorce. This leaves never married, non-resident fathers, an increasing demographic group (DeBell, 2008), ineligible for programs' services. Second, many of these programs did not serve fathers exclusively, and the FTP program provided no fatherhood-specific services at all. Finally, none of these programs documented any efforts to engage the fathers in events and activities beyond those directly related to program curricula or data collection. This is surprising, given that many researchers have found that establishing strong relationships and connections with fathers has been associated with positive program outcomes (Fagan, 2007; Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, & Pruett, 2009). Therefore, despite the contributions of existing programs, there remains a gap in the literature with regard to the development of fatherhood programs that not only engage in parenting skill development and outcome driven data collection, but also engage

fathers at a level that affirms and celebrates who they are as men and fathers. The Man Up program is one such program. The remainder of this article is dedicated to discussing the development of this grassroots program, which combines parent education and community engagement events and activities to engage fathers at a deeper level.

Man Up Fatherhood Program

The Man Up fatherhood program was established in 2009 and is operated and managed by the Community Empowerment Center (CEC), a faith-based organization in Louisville, Kentucky. Man Up was developed in response to the growing concern that many children in the neighborhood immediately surrounding the CEC were growing up with low levels of involvement from their fathers and susceptible to many social problems such as poverty (Nock & Einolf, 2008) and low educational attainment (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005) associated with absent fathers. Man Up's mission is to empower men in the roles of fathers by providing them with the tools necessary for them to serve as responsible fathers through a continuing program of activities and services that promote healthy marriage, financial stability, and life planning. It should be noted that although Man Up encourages marriage as the most sustainable pathway for involved fatherhood, it actively recruits and provides services to fathers who are not married and show no interest in marriage. Man Up advances its mission by providing parent education workshops and sponsoring community activities and events that promote responsible and engaged fathering.

Program History

The initial funding for Man Up was secured from the NFI through one of its \$25,000 capacity building grants. In addition to the funding, the program director and administrator attended NFIs Certification College, where they received 40 hours of technical assistance from expert consultants in the areas of leadership development, program development, organizational development, and community engagement. As an NFI capacity-building grantee, Man Up was awarded an additional 40 hours of technical assistance over a 10-month period following the certification college.

Program Staff and Volunteers

Man Up is directed by a young and enthusiastic pastor whose values and faith led him to engage the local community in developing solutions to

its challenges rather than focusing on its deficits. The program's administrative staff person is a native of Louisville, Kentucky, who has over 30 years of experience in working with grassroots community organizations. In addition to its two staff members, Man Up also relies on the work of a volunteer advisory board that helps plan and coordinate events, as well as facilitates the program's parent education workshops. Comprised of four members, the advisory board includes a university professor whose research interest is fathers' involvement with their children, the director of a university cultural center, a certified truck driver and father, and the chief administrative officer of a community health clinic.

Man Up Overview/Program Development Model

Man Up delivers innovative fatherhood programming through a model that combines parent education workshops, father and family friendly activities, and community outreach events. The purpose of the workshops, activities, and events is to enhance fathers' parenting skills and to increase awareness regarding the unique and irreplaceable role that fathers play in the lives of their children. The parent education component comes in the form of workshops for fathers facilitated by members of the volunteer advisory board. Although fathers of all ages and experience levels are invited to participate in the workshops, the target population is new and expecting fathers who are more likely to benefit from the NFI-developed Dr. Dad parent education curriculum that focuses on infant and toddler health and safety (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). The workshops consist of two four-hour sessions organized into four modules (the well child, the sick child, the injured child, and the safe child). The topics covered in the curriculum include learning a child's temperament, treating fevers and the common cold, taking children's temperature, treating minor burns, and addressing nutrition, immunization, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and parental anger. Participants for the Dr. Dad parent education workshops are recruited from local social service agencies that serve new and expectant mothers, local community centers, public recreational facilities, and neighborhood barber shops; Promoters also rely on church announcements, social networking media, and word-of-mouth testimonials and endorsements from fathers who have completed the workshops. Although beyond the scope of this article, the effectiveness of the Dr. Dad parent education

workshops is currently being evaluated using pre and post assessments that examine participants' knowledge regarding infant health and safety.

In addition to Man Up's parent education workshops, what makes it unique is its emphasis on community engagement through its father- and family-friendly activities and outreach efforts. In its attempt to simultaneously encourage its participants in father-child interaction and to increase public awareness about the importance of responsible and involved fatherhood, Man Up sponsors community events designed to show participants as committed, active fathers. This presents the public with images of caring, generative fathers that dispel many of the myths associated with being a young, low income, minority, or non-resident father, demographic groups represented by Man Up's participants. It also provides other fathers in similar circumstances with tangible examples of responsible and involved fathers. Among these events are Fatherhood Family Fun Days and Dad's Day at the Movies. To date, Man Up has sponsored three Fatherhood Family Fun Days, all held in local parks so that children had ample space to run, play, and bounce on inflatable playground toys. In addition to renting the inflatable playground toys, Man Up also provided free refreshments to all participating parents (fathers and mothers) and their children. Local television covered one of the Fatherhood Family Fun Days, which included interviews featuring Man Up's director and one of its advisory board members. Both discussed the important role fathers play in the lives of their children and encouraged the public to support future Fatherhood Family Fun Days. The other community event, Dad's Day at the Movies, involved a group of fathers accompanying their young children to a local movie theater to participate in a private screening of Disney's "The Princess and the Frog." To coordinate this event, Man Up partnered with a chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., an international sorority, to negotiate a group discount ticket rate with the theater to have a private screening of the film on a Saturday morning before normal business hours. Man Up also partnered with several churches to arrange for fathers without transportation to ride to and from the movie in vans at no cost.

Although the Fatherhood Family Fun Days and Dad's Day at the Movies have advanced Man Up's mission by promoting engaged fatherhood and collaborating with community partners to increase awareness related to the importance of fatherhood, perhaps its largest community outreach effort has been its Fatherhood Leadership

Summit. Based on the recommendations of the NFI (2006), Man Up convened a forum of community leaders from various sectors to discuss issues related to fatherhood. Included in this discussion were the roles of fathers with their children, within the family, and the ways that each sector could work collaboratively with Man Up to help fathers facilitate engaged and responsible fathering among its participants. In the planning of the leadership summit, Man Up's staff and its advisory board leveraged its relationship with the University of Louisville's Office of Community Engagement to identify and invite four leaders in each of eight sectors (e.g. education, business, government, health, social services, media, law enforcement, and civic leaders), as well as lay members of the community to participate in the leadership summit. In sum, a total of 21 of the invited leaders (representing seven sectors) and 17 lay members of the community participated in the summit.

The summit was held at the University of Louisville and lasted for two hours. After opening introductions and a brief overview of the Man Up program, the keynote speaker, a consultant from NFI, gave a 30-minute talk regarding the importance of fathers and the positive outcomes for families and children associated with high levels of paternal involvement. The next hour consisted of three concurrent breakout sessions moderated by Man Up advisory board members aimed at responding to the question, "What are fathers' specific roles in the lives of their children, families, and communities?" Each session addressed one of the three contexts (children, families, and communities) for engaged and responsible fathering. At the conclusion of the breakout sessions, the entire group reconvened to report the findings from the individual breakout sessions and to discuss what each sector could do in collaboration with Man Up to promote engaged and responsible fatherhood.

Man Up Vs. Model Programs

Although Man Up is early in its development, it compares favorably with many of the programs identified in the literature as model programs. See Table 1 for a comparison of the most popular models for fatherhood programs in the literature. First and foremost, Man Up is unlike any of the model programs in its efforts to engage fathers in community activities and events. In maintaining its uniqueness, Man Up has sponsored events to facilitate father-child bonds, provided the public with images of actively involved fathers

and solicited the input and assistance of various community partners to enhance its ability to provide services to fathers. Beyond the differences in the level of community engagement, Man Up is different from the model programs in other ways as well. The other major difference is that Man Up’s target population is more diverse and inclusive than any of the programs. For the model programs, access to services is driven by the eligibility criteria of the program evaluations. This means that the program target populations are rather homogenous and are limited in their ability to account for differences in environmental contexts that shape fathering behavior. Contrarily, by not restricting services to resident fathers, married fathers, adolescent fathers, first-time fathers, or biological fathers, Man Up is better positioned to serve a more comprehensive cross section of fathers and father figures representing the diversity of fathering contexts.

Aside from the differences, Man Up is similar to the model programs in many ways. Man Up is consistent with almost all of the other model

programs in its provision of services to enhance fathers’ parenting skills. The one exception is the FTP program that provided no services to fathers. Despite the generally universal provision of parenting skills training, the types of parenting skills varied by program. Man Up, the Parenting Together Project, Young Dads, and the Video Self-modeling programs’ focus on skills primarily used with infants and toddlers, while the Preparing for the Drug Free Years program emphasizes attachment and communication skills with school age children. Similar to the model programs, Man Up engages in research and evaluation data collection to determine the effectiveness of its services to fathers. The difference in this area is that the other programs were identified as model programs based largely on having publicly available evaluation results showing some signs of positive impact while Man Up has yet to complete its evaluation. However, Man Up is currently collecting data that will soon be analyzed and made publicly available. Finally, Man Up is similar to most of the model programs in that

TABLE 1. Comparison of Model Fatherhood Programs to Man Up

Program	Reference	Target Population	Program Focus
Dads for Life	Cookston et al., 2007	Divorced fathers	Improve mothers and fathers coparenting after divorce
Family Transition Program	Bloom et al., 2000	Single mothers transitioning off AFDC	Reduce AFDC rolls by positively affecting employment and income
Parenting Together Project	Doherty et al., 2006	Adult, 1st time married or cohabitating fathers	Enhance father-child interaction and increase involvement during transition to parenthood
PEACE Program	McKenry et al., 1999	Court-ordered parents seeking divorce decree	Help parents to assist their children in coping with post divorce adjustment
Preparing for the Drug Free Years	Haggerty et al., 1999	Parents of 8-14 year old kids at risk for drug abuse	Strengthen parent-child bonds and attachments to serve as a buffer against drug abuse
Fairfax County Fatherhood Program for Incarcerated Dads	Robberts, 2005	Recently incarcerated fathers	Promote responsible fatherhood by helping fathers maintain contact with their children while incarcerated
Video: Self-modeling Parenting Education for First-Time Dads	Magill-Evans et al., 2007	First-time adult fathers	Increase fathers’ ability to recognize and respond to their infants’ behavioral cues
Young Dads	Mazza, 2002	First-time adolescent fathers	Teach parenting skills and address fathers’ life needs
Man Up		Inexperienced fathers or father figures	Empower fathers and father figures by providing them with the skills to serve as responsible fathers

most of the programs, including Man Up, do not provide services aimed at increasing fathers' parenting capacity. The Young Dads program is the only model program providing such services, which consist of collaboration between program participants and social work case managers to secure vouchers and referrals for assistance with housing, health care, and vocational services. It should be noted that although to date Man Up does not provide parenting capacity services, it does partner with many of its community partners to ensure that its participants receive appropriate services.

Discussion

We have chronicled the Man Up fatherhood program since its beginning, described the model it is using to integrate fatherhood programming and community engagement, and distinguished it from other well-documented fatherhood programs. Conceptualized as a response to one of a community's most pressing needs, Man Up realized a major goal when it received a NFI capacity building grant in 2009. Since that time, the program has served fathers and families through educational workshops, interactive activities, and community events. In fact, it is this emphasis on engaging and promoting responsible fatherhood through community events that makes Man Up unique. In sponsoring such events and activities,

Man Up works collaboratively with community partners to make the most of its resources and to bring attention to the importance of involved fathers. In promoting the development of a father-friendly community, Man Up has established and cultivated relationships with the University of Louisville, other community and faith-based organizations, governmental agencies, businesses, the news media, and other institutions. Through these collaborations, not only is Man Up helping to enhance father-child attachments and increased levels of paternal involvement, but it is also working strategically with its partners to make the community more welcoming to fathers and the organizations that serve them.

Lessons Learned

Given the complexities of implementing a new fatherhood program, Man Up's program development model, which integrates fatherhood programming and community engagement, may inform community organizers and practitioners' efforts to establish relationships with community partners and advance their programmatic missions. Although Man Up plans to capitalize on the momentum it has built in and around Louisville, it has faced several challenges that serve as potential barriers to its long term success. Following is a discussion of lessons learned and several recommendations for practitioners interested in

TABLE 1 (continued). Comparison of Model Fatherhood Programs to Man Up

Program	Concrete Parenting Skills	Facilitate Parenting Capacity	Research & Evaluation Component	Community Engagement Component
Dads for Life	Yes	No	Yes	No
Family Transition Program	No	No	Yes	No
Parenting Together Project	Yes	No	Yes	No
PEACE Program	Yes	No	Yes	No
Preparing for the Drug Free Years	Yes	No	Yes	No
Fairfax County Fatherhood Program for Incarcerated Dads	Yes	No	Yes	No
Video Self-modeling Parenting Education for the First Time Dads	Yes	No	Yes	No
Young Dads	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Man Up	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

developing a new fatherhood program.

Consistency with regard to logistics promotes retention and cohesion. The first major lesson Man Up learned was the importance of being consistent with the logistics of the Dr. Dad parent education workshops, especially with regard to dates, times, and location of group sessions. In other words, meeting at the same time on the same day of the week and at the same location facilitated participant retention. This type of consistency also enhances the level of cohesion among the Dr. Dad parent education workshop participants who develop relationships and serve as informal support systems for one another based on their common experiences.

Recruiting strategies should be based on strengths and resonate with the target population. Man Up learned not to refer to the parent education workshops as “workshops.” Rather, in marketing they are referred to as “Man Up Fatherhood Rap Sessions.” In many urban contexts, a “rap session” is understood to be a gathering of likeminded individuals who come together to share and receive information on a given topic. It should be noted that not referring to the workshops as workshops is in no way meant to mislead potential participants. Rather, this is an attempt to adopt language that resonates with potential participants and comes from a strengths perspective. In fact, the idea of not using the word workshop came from a program participant who discussed his initial reluctance to participate based on previous experiences with other programs’ workshops that operated under the assumption that he needed instruction or remediation instead of recognizing his potential to contribute to the group.

To the extent possible, fatherhood programs need to address parenting capacity. Addressing fathers’ parenting capacity involves assisting fathers in securing the social and financial resources necessary to fulfill their roles as parents. This is important in that the lives of many fatherhood program participants are very complex, and when they do not have a means to secure basic necessities for themselves and their children, issues related to enhancing their parenting capacity take precedence over enhancing their parenting skills (Weinman, Buzi, & Smith, 2005). Although Man Up does not yet have the staff to address many of its participants’ parenting capacity concerns, it is currently building relationships with community partners that are better positioned to provide job placement, educational, medical, and housing assistance services similar to those described in the Young Dads program (Mazza, 2002).

Recommendations from the Field

We anticipate that our experience with Man Up will provide us with rich data from which we expect to learn a great deal. So far the experience has provided us with some realizations and recommendations that may be helpful to others working to establish successful fatherhood programs. Here are some preliminary recommendations:

More fatherhood programs should partner with organizations that provide services to mothers and children. As Vann (2007) pointed out, ultimately fatherhood programs should strive to empower fathers to positively contribute to their children’s growth and development. Moreover, since mothers are often children’s primary caregivers, the extent to which both resident and non-resident fathers have access to their children influences their opportunities to apply the skills that they develop in fatherhood programs. Therefore, it may be that partnering with agencies that provide services to mothers and children can facilitate programming aimed at addressing negative interpersonal issues that inhibit fathers’ involvement.

Increase the number of partnerships between fatherhood programs that compete with each other. While turf battles and the competition for scarce resources may preclude many fatherhood programs from working collaboratively, there are benefits to forming coalitions with other fatherhood programs. Because there is so much variability in the environmental circumstances affecting different types of fathers’ willingness and ability to stay active in their children’s lives, individual programs may have difficulty providing comprehensive services across various groups of fathers. However, partnering with other programs allows programs to focus on their target populations. For example, Man Up has partnered with another local fatherhood program that is more established and recognized, particularly for its work in the area conflict resolution and mediation services to non-resident fathers. Before Man Up was established, the other program was compelled to serve all fathers, regardless of their individual needs. Therefore, agency resources and personnel were being spread very thin, ultimately to the detriment of the program’s target population. Given Man Up’s interest in working with new and expecting fathers and the more established program’s willingness to collaborate, the more established program is now able to commit more of its resources to serving its intended target population while also creating a space for Man Up to develop its own identity.

Take advantage of opportunities to creatively market fatherhood programs. This can be accomplished through traditional media such as newspapers and broadcast media. As mentioned, Man Up regularly sends press releases to media personnel seeking coverage of its events so that the community not only becomes aware of Man Up's existence, but also is exposed to positive images of fathers engaging in the lives of their children. However, securing coverage of community events is not always possible. Establishing media connections is difficult given the competition for news coverage. Also, there is no guarantee that coverage will portray the program or its fathers in the intended light. Therefore, it is recommended that fatherhood programs and administrators disseminate their messages on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Utilizing these resources is a cost effective way to get the message out. Moreover, as people shift the way that they seek out and receive news and information, social media will become more and more important. Using multiple media streams, of course, is the best way to educate the greatest number about the program.

Conclusion

Among social scientists, practitioners, and policymakers, there has been an increased interest in fathers' influence on families and their involvement with their children. This increased interest represents an opportunity to develop new programs to provide services to fathers aimed at promoting their positive contributions to their children and families' growth and development. Man Up is one such program. It was established out of concern for children in the surrounding community. Its model features the integration of fatherhood parent education programming with community engagement. Although it is still developing, if its initial success is any indication, Man Up, through the combination of fatherhood programming and community engagement, will be a well supported, sustainable asset to the community that in turn facilitates the development of well supported, sustainable families who also will serve as assets to the community.

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