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Fathering to Meet the Needs of Children

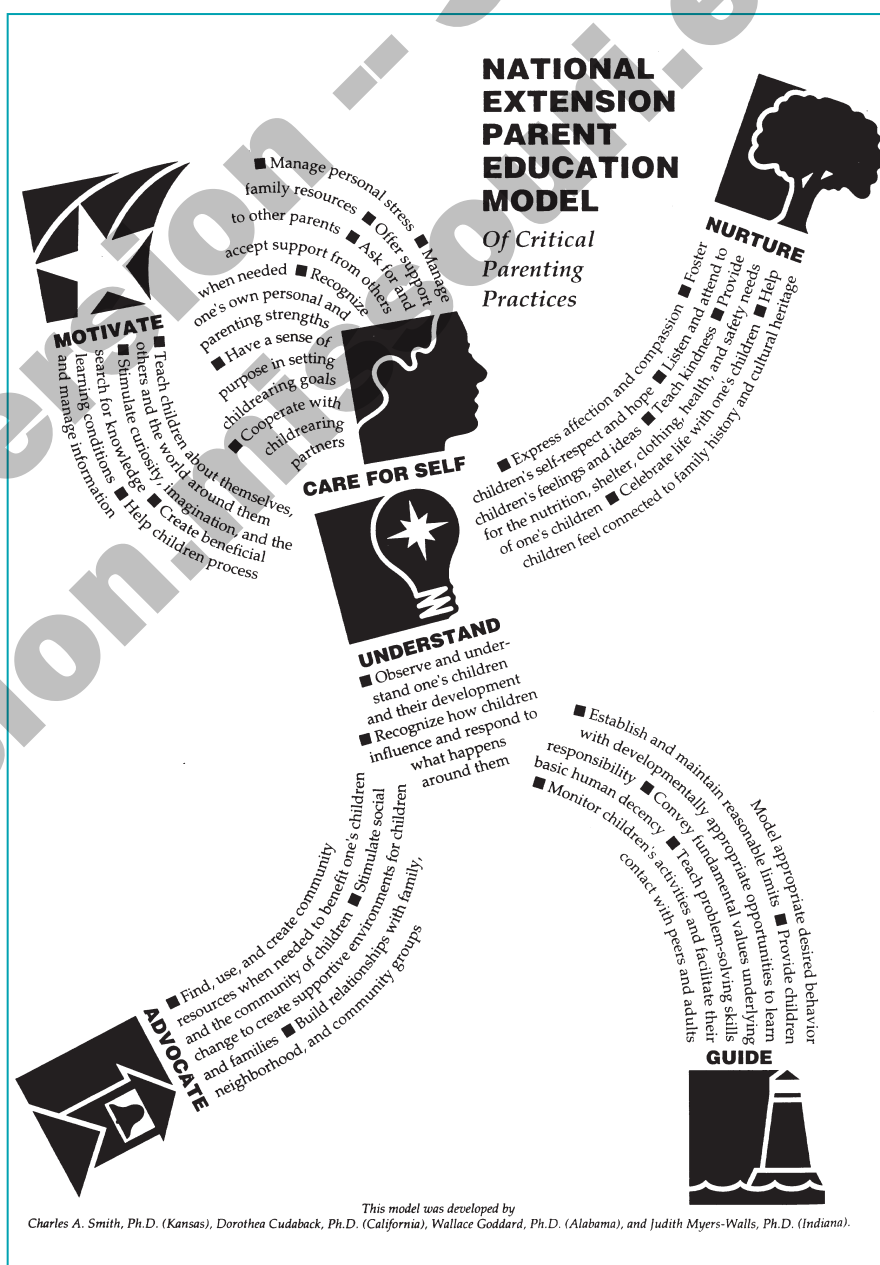
Human Development and Family Studies Extension

Fathers' roles

What our society has expected from fathers has changed over the course of history. There continue to be new expectations for fathers. In addition, fathers decide how they will carry out their fathering roles. Fathers may look to their own fathers as role models or they may look to other models for examples of positive parenting. These influences can leave fathers wondering, "What are the expectations of me as a father?" and "How can I meet these expectations?"

Fathers can begin by focusing on how they can best meet the needs of their children. Fathers can benefit from seeking out reliable sources of parenting information to help them understand what children's needs are and how they can meet them. Research shows that fathers and mothers accomplish positive parenting in different ways. This publication describes how fathers can meet the needs of their children by applying the National Extension Parent Education Model. This model explains the important parenting practices that promote the well-being of children.

Fathers can meet their children's needs by using these parenting strategies: caring for oneself; better understanding their children; nurturing,



guiding and motivating their children; and being an advocate for children.



Caring for oneself

Fathers who care for themselves:

- ✓ Manage their own stress;
- ✓ Reach out and accept help from others when it is needed;
- ✓ Know and develop their own personal and parenting strengths;
- ✓ Manage family resources (time, money, etc.);
- ✓ Plan and set parenting goals;
- ✓ Cooperate with their child-rearing partners.

You can take good care of yourself by maintaining your physical and mental health. Sometimes external demands such as stressful jobs can leave you exhausted and less mentally and physically available to meet your children's needs. In these circumstances, you may need to reconsider the demands placed on you and what your personal interests and goals are. Ask yourself, "Where do my children fit into my life?" Then make a conscious effort to balance your own life so you can meet the needs of your children. If you recognize and develop your own personal and parenting strengths you will be able to better meet your children's needs.

Some fathers may need to obtain professional help to treat substance abuse or other negative behaviors. Researchers have identified relationships between fathers' unhealthy lifestyles and the risks of these on their children's well-being. Getting help in these situations can be the first step to meeting the needs of one's children.

You can help your children by

effectively managing family resources. For example, when you (and your children's mother) provide financial support for your children, you provide a basis for meeting a wide range of your children's needs. Research shows that fathers' educational levels, and the amount of financial support they provide, result in long-term consequences for their children. These factors influence your children's future educational attainment, among other things. A higher level of education for children then results in positive consequences for them, such as greater job possibilities and the potential for better pay.

Children's needs are better met when you plan and set child-rearing goals. An example of this would be when you say to yourself, "I would like to help my child learn to dress himself." Next, you can set goals for yourself and your child such as "I will give him opportunities to select what he wears," "I will ask my child to dress himself and I will help as needed," and "When my child becomes frustrated, I will remain patient and will provide him with encouragement."

Children benefit when their fathers are respectful of and cooperative with the other people who care for them. Additionally, you and your child-rearing partner can improve the outcomes for your children by sharing responsibilities of parenting. In some situations it may be difficult for child-rearing partners to work cooperatively, but focusing together on meeting children's needs is very important.

Fathering is sometimes accomplished by men other than (or in addition to) the child's biological or adoptive father, such as stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles and friends. These men can also benefit from the information presented in this publication.



Understand

Fathers who understand their children:

- ✓ Observe their development;
- ✓ Identify their specific needs;
- ✓ Recognize their unique ways of seeing the world;
- ✓ Realize that their children are influenced by and respond to what happens around them.

Ways to understand children

Get to know your children through play, talk and everyday activities. According to researchers, when fathers participate in give-and-take play with their children, they help them to develop skills for effective interactions with their schoolmates.

Observe your children's development. It is helpful to understand that children of the same age develop in both similar and in different ways. For example, two 12-month-old children can be the same size, but one may use several words and the other may not yet be using words. Differences among children also mean that they may see the world in unique ways. Some children enjoy playing in large groups, while others prefer playing with just one friend. A basic understanding of child development can help you to have realistic expectations for your children. This can lead to less frustration for both you and your children. Publications on child development are listed in the Understand section of the resource list at the end of this publication.

Consider how your children's environment (parents, child care, school, friends, neighborhood, etc.) influences them. For example, it is important to understand how strongly

children are influenced by the quality of child care you choose for them. Also, think about how your children impact their environments. Your children's behaviors also influence the teachers and other children in the child care setting.



Nurture

Nurturing fathers:

- ✓ Build positive relationships with their children;
- ✓ Give frequent and consistent messages of love and support to their children;
- ✓ Pay attention to the needs of children and act to meet these needs;
- ✓ Celebrate life with their children;
- ✓ Make connections with family history and cultural heritage for their children.

Ways to nurture your children

If you have a newborn, get involved early in his or her life. Begin by holding and caring for your newborn. Do not worry about spoiling your infant by quickly responding to his or her needs.

It is helpful to know that young children cry to communicate their needs. They may cry when they are hungry, tired, uncomfortable, sick or lonely. When your children cry, meet their needs. This will help establish a trusting and secure relationship.

As your children grow, continue to show them affection and a caring attitude. Give your child a hug, kiss or special signs that have a positive meaning, such as thumbs-up or a high-five. Recognize that older children and teens are seeking to become more independent. This desire for independence may cause them to resist parental affection, especially

in public settings. Be sensitive to this and find out what is comfortable for your teen. Realize that, although teens may resist affection from their parents, they still want to know that their parents care about them. You can show your teens that you care about them by talking with them about their interests and attending their school and community activities.

Comfort your children when they are disappointed by their failures. Reassure them by telling them that making mistakes is part of the learning process. Encourage them to try again, and support them in their efforts.

Listen and respond supportively to your children's ideas and feelings. Ask open-ended questions about his or her day, such as "Tell me what you did today," "How did you feel about that?" or "What are your ideas about that?" Then listen attentively. You don't always have to agree with your children but you need to be willing to listen.

Nurturing children also means meeting their basic needs for nutrition, shelter, clothing and safety. Some ways to meet these basic needs:

- ✓ Go grocery shopping with your children; show them how to select and prepare healthy foods.
- ✓ Do household chores with your children.
- ✓ Take your children shopping for school clothes.
- ✓ Take your children to the doctor and dentist. Make sure that your children receive regular check-ups and immunizations.
- ✓ Carefully choose child care providers for your children.
- ✓ Provide safe situations for your children while at home and during activities. Supervising your children is the basis for keeping them safe.

Studies have shown that it is better for children when their fathers spend

time meeting a variety of their needs rather than just entertaining them or giving them gifts.

Additional ways to nurture your children can be accomplished by strengthening family relationships. This can be done by attending family gatherings, telling family stories and showing photographs from your childhood and from previous generations. When explaining how family members are related to you and your children, it can be helpful to use photographs. You can also tell your children how these family members have positively influenced your life.

Other important personal connections can be formed by participating in cultural/religious activities with your child. Develop special activities for your family around holidays, birthdays or certain days of the week. On a particular holiday you and your children can prepare special food together or decorate the house; birthdays can be celebrated by preparing a birthday cake for the person celebrating his or her birthday. Friday nights can be spent doing fun activities together.

According to researchers, both sons and daughters benefit from nurturing relationships with their fathers. For sons, research has shown a positive relationship between the amount of time they spend with nurturing fathers and their intellectual performance and abilities to problem-solve. Additionally, college men who reported positive personal qualities and behaviors in themselves reported their fathers to have been nurturing and available. Likewise, college women with well-adjusted personalities reported their fathers as having been very nurturant and interested in them. We think that these findings may also apply to men and women who have not had college experience. Other research indicates

that women who had high intellectual and job accomplishments were more likely than other women to have had positive relationships with fathers who expected them to be capable and persistent.



Guide

Fathers who provide guidance:

- ✓ Serve as positive role models;
- ✓ Monitor children's activities;
- ✓ Establish and maintain reasonable limits based on children's stages of development;
- ✓ Help their children to develop self-control and to fulfill responsibilities;
- ✓ Encourage positive involvement of peers and other adults with their children;
- ✓ Teach their children basic values of human decency and problem solving skills.

Ways to guide children

Model the kind of behavior you want your child to display. If you want your child to be respectful, then respect yourself and others, including your child. Show your children that you respect both them and their teachers by helping your children to complete their homework on time and by attending parent-teacher conferences.

It's important to know where your child is, who your child is with, and what your child is doing. Provide lots of close supervision for young children. Older children still need supervision and guidance in their involvement with friends.

Help your children develop friendships by arranging and supervising play times/activities for them. Try organized learning experiences such as 4-H, Girl Scouts,

Boy Scouts or sports.

Discipline your child to help teach him or her self-control while encouraging the development of his or her self-esteem. Discipline includes:

- Establishing realistic expectations and limits for your child based on his or her stage of development
- Being "...concerned, calm, consistent, and caring" while you "...lead, guide, and teach your children" (Children's Trust Fund, 1994).

Discipline differs from punishment because physical punishment hurts children. Physical punishment does not effectively help children to develop self-control and can negatively affect their well-being.

Developing self-control through decision making

You can help your children begin to develop self-control by encouraging them to make responsible decisions. Let them know that they can make choices for their behavior, and that consequences (negative or positive) will occur for their choices. For example, your child can decide how quickly to get ready for bedtime. Choosing to take a long time to get ready could result in a shortened story time. It is important that you give praise to your children for their good behavior and accomplishments.

Ways to encourage personal responsibility

Teach your young children how to care for themselves by showing them how to wash their hands before meals, brush their teeth and get dressed. Your older children need to be responsible for completing their homework on time, and you can assist them in meeting these responsibilities. Hold your older children responsible for maintaining curfews, and have discussions with them about making responsible choices for their sexuality. Publications on children's sexuality are listed in the Guide section of the resource list at the end of this publication.

Problem solving

Children need to begin learning how to solve problems. Help your child identify what the problem is and have him or her suggest possible solutions to it. Agree on a possible solution and ask him or her to try it out. Help your child decide whether or not the problem was solved, and if it wasn't solved, discuss why. Be patient, and have your child try other possible solutions. Show your child

Ways to encourage kindness and responsibility for others

Teach your children how to be kind to and responsible for others. You can do this by having your young child help you set the table and by assisting you with feeding a pet. Suggest that older children show their younger siblings how to accomplish something, like putting a puzzle together or tying their shoes. Encourage teens to be kind to others by volunteering at a child care center or hospital.

Research shows that children who are kind to others and are responsible for their own emotions have had nurturing fathers. Research also indicates that adult children who act responsibly and are understanding and tolerant had fathers who were positively involved in their lives.

Ways to encourage household responsibility

Meals

Involve your children in meal preparation. Give your young child opportunities to pour and stir ingredients together. Show older children how to use measuring spoons and cups to measure ingredients. Teens can help you prepare meals for the family.

Cleaning

Make a game out of picking up toys with young children. Set a timer for 10 minutes and see if all of the toys can be picked up before the timer rings. Help older children to organize and decorate their rooms. Teens can help you by accepting responsibility for a variety of cleaning jobs, such as sweeping the floors, dusting the furniture and taking out the garbage.

Fixing things

Show young children how to fix simple paper items with school glue or tape. Teach older children how to fix and build a variety of things. Examples of this would be showing your children how to repair a broken fence and how to build a bird feeder.

Yard work and gardening

You can involve your children in these tasks. Show them how to rake leaves (provide a small rake) and how to grow flowers and vegetables.

how obtaining other information can help him or her solve a problem. Congratulate your child for his or her

Ways to encourage financial responsibility

- ✓ Show young children how to save money, in a piggy bank, for a future purchase.
- ✓ Take older children to the bank to set-up a savings account, teach children to comparison shop, and give them opportunities to earn money doing special tasks.
- ✓ Help your teen look for a summer job.
- ✓ Teach teens how to balance a checkbook, responsibly use a credit card, and file a tax return.
- ✓ Assist your teen in writing a resume and practicing interviewing skills.

effort in solving the problem.

Responsibility

Give your child opportunities to learn how to be responsible based on his or her level of development. There are numerous opportunities for children to learn responsibility while doing everyday activities such as caring for themselves and helping out at home. Both boys and girls benefit from learning skills for a wide range of responsibilities. For example, girls benefit when they learn how to repair things, and boys get valuable experience when they learn how to do housekeeping tasks.



Motivate

Fathers who motivate their children:

- ✓ Create conditions that help their learning;

- ✓ Teach them about themselves, the world and other people;
- ✓ Encourage them to be curious and to use their imaginations, and to seek out knowledge;
- ✓ Help them think about and organize information.

Ways to motivate children

Research shows that children's early experiences help determine the way their brains develop and function. You can encourage healthy brain development in your infant and preschooler. Ways to do this include talking, singing and reading to them; and providing them with safe places to explore and play. According to researchers, these experiences will impact your children's lifelong ways of thinking and acting. Also, protect your children from brain injury — never shake or hit your child

For more information on children's brain development, refer to the Motivate section in the resource list.

Take your children on outings and use activities that encourage them to be imaginative, curious and in search of knowledge. Learning is fun when you go to a library, museum, zoo, science center, drama performance or concert. Many cities and schools provide free or lower-cost admission for children to these activities.

Teach children about themselves, other people, their neighborhood, community, state, country and other places in the world. Start by helping them learn their address and phone number, where their city is located within their state, where their state is located within their country, etc. Additionally, you can help your children learn about other people and places by talking with people from different heritages and locations.

Help children obtain and properly use information. Provide access to books, newspapers, educational TV

and radio, and computers. Find out what your children's interests are, read books to them on these subjects and discuss the information. Use computers with children and monitor their use of computer information.

Researchers suggest that children do better in school when their fathers are involved in their lives and provide them with encouragement. In contrast, children's motivation and success can be reduced when fathers frequently intrude and place too many restrictions on them.



Advocate

Fathers who advocate for children:

- ✓ Locate, use and develop community resources to help children;
- ✓ Develop connections with family, neighborhood and community groups;
- ✓ Help make social changes for supporting children and families.

Ways to advocate

Identify the needs of your children and the children in your community. Does your child have a special need? Could children in your community benefit from a particular service? If so, then locate, use and develop community resources to meet the needs of your children and children in your community. For example, if you think that your child might have a learning disability, then reach out for information and resources to help your child. For referrals to community resources that can help you with children's special needs, phone ParentLink (listed in the additional resources and referrals section of this publication).

Studies show that children who

have special needs benefit when both their fathers and mothers are involved in supportive relationships with them.

You can also develop connections with other family members, neighborhood and community groups that can give you support in meeting your children's needs. For example, if children in your community could benefit from a park or street crossing signals then identify a community official or group that can help you and approach them with the idea. Also, starting a fathers support group would be a way to develop connections with other dads.

Help make social change happen by creating environments that support children and families. For example, if you think that a school bond will benefit the children in your community, then get involved in supporting the effort. You can make phone calls, attend meetings, volunteer and vote.

Conclusion

All of this information can leave you feeling somewhat overwhelmed. Don't be discouraged. Fathering is a big responsibility, but it is also a learning process. All fathers (and mothers) make mistakes, but using the parenting practices (Care for Self, Understand, Nurture, Guide, Motivate, and Advocate) can help you meet your children's needs.

Your positive involvement in your child's life will result in lifelong positive outcomes for him or her.

Resources

Understand

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For additional information call:

ParentLink: 1-800-552-8522
University of Missouri Extension
publications: Toll-free ordering: 1-800-292-0969.

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For more information, please visit the MU Extension Web site at:

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