MEANS FOR ENHANCED PARTICIPATION OF FATHERS IN HEALTH CARE, EARLY INTERVENTION, AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

ATTITUDINAL:

- Carefully examine the attitudes providers have towards fathers in general. There is often a prevailing belief system that fathers are not willing to be involved in their children's health care or education, nor will they change. Understand how such attitudes impact the delivery of services to family members.

- Fathers are sometimes viewed as “difficult” to work with. Discuss how such stereotypes are perpetuated. All systemic change begins when this discussion takes place.

- Images convey powerful expectations. In marketing and advertising your programs and services, include positive pictures and quotations from men, specifically encouraging male involvement. Have a column for men in agency and clinic newsletters.

- Develop clinic and agency initiatives aimed at enhancing male involvement. Collaborate with a consortium of community-based organizations that offer health, social service and education services for males. Develop public service announcements that focus on men and the importance they have in the lives of their children with disabilities and chronic illness.

- Support women and mothers to encourage men and fathers to be involved in the lives of their children. This will limit the stratification of family roles (i.e., women raise the children, men work).

TRAINING AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT:

- There are an increasing numbers of videos to use as training tools; they emphasize that fathers are critical to the well being of their families and children. Emphasize the idea that the men in these videos are not exceptional or extraordinary; they are fathers simply doing what they know is important and valuable to do.

- Broaden agency and clinic staff through active recruitment and training of men. Utilize community-based organizations as sources of referral. Use men in paraprofessional roles where their personal background and skills are as valued as their professional degrees. Have fathers on boards and policy making committees.

- Build relationships with local universities to target men as potential candidates for their social service programs (health care, education). Advocate for an improved salary base for such positions.

PROGRAM & POLICY:

- All programs need to be substantive in nature. When working with men success is rarely measured in numbers. Most programs for fathers evolve slowly. Build a core of committed, involved fathers who in turn will market and support the programs to other men. This allows programs to be built from within where the men themselves take responsibility for its overall success.

- Provide health care services in as flexible a manner as possible; programs and appointments need to occur at times when men realistically can attend. Have child care and transportation available when needed.
Encourage men to be involved during the intake and early treatment of the child. When a man is not in attendance, initiate questions on how a primary male figure can be included. This won’t always be the biological father; it could be a boyfriend, stepfather, uncle, grandfather, church member or neighbor. Be sure all intake forms include male figures in the child’s life.

Where a divorce has occurred -- and if legally appropriate and consent has been given -- send all information about a child to both parties.

Offer classes and programs that fit the needs, concerns, and culture of the community. Consider parenting and fathering classes, 1:1 mentoring relationships, and father-child activity programs. Investigate and use current curriculum on effective parenting. Such programs build skills and diminish the isolation so many men experience. Empower the fathers to be part of the leadership team; this will enhance levels of “ownership” and involvement in the programs.

When the population and interest dictates, develop father support programs focused on specific issues (i.e., disabilities, behavior management, single parenting) and enhancing personal relationships with other men. Read the monograph, Circles of Care and Understanding: Support Programs for Fathers of Children with Special Needs (J. May, 1992) for suggestions on how to start such programs. By listening to the men’s specific concerns, such programs can be established around the needs of the men themselves.

As a means of breaking down male isolation, promote social occasions for fathers. Utilize these occasions to enhance their awareness regarding available professional services; assist them in making connections with other men. Such events need to be as fun, low-key, and non-threatening as possible.

Develop activity-based programs where fathers are directly involved with their children (i.e., a “Pops ’n Tots” night). Men learn from other men.

When making an appointment for home-based programs, encourage the father to be in attendance. Welcome him, value his input, direct specific questions and concerns to him. Let him know he is a valued member and equal partner on the team.

COMMUNITY-BASED OPTIONS:

Education and health care are just two facets of a father’s life. In areas of high unemployment, develop programs of support for men that provide both emotional assistance as well as educational and vocational training. Such programs can be developed in collaboration with community-based social service organizations.

Children are at-risk -- emotionally, financially, socially and spiritually -- when fathers are not a consistent, supportive part of their development. Assist men in understanding the legal rights they have in regards to their children.

In cases of suspected or actual abuse, strongly encourage men to enroll in anger management courses and counseling. When properly staffed and run, these are effective in assisting men to learn appropriate patterns of personal behavior.

Apply for grant monies that specifically target father involvement and fatherhood issues. Collaborate with Headstart; there is no better place to begin than in early childhood.

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BOOKS ON FATHERS: Raising A Child With Special Needs


**VIDEOTAPES ON FATHERS**


New Mexico Department of Health (1996). Man to man. Office of Family Planning, New Mexico Department of Health, P.O. Box 26110, Santa Fe, NM 87502-6110.


**OTHER RESOURCES/Organizations For Fathers**

Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy, c/o Family Resource Coalition, Kirk E. Harris & David Pate, 200 S. Michigan Ave., 16th Floor, Chicago, IL 60604, (312) 341-0900.

Examines the legal and social service support systems available to never-married, low-skilled, and low income fathers. Educates and informs policy makers and the public about the need for public policies that assist fathers in becoming completely involved with their children.

Fathers' Resource Center, Neil Tift, c/o Prevention Alliance, Loring Park Office Building, 430 Oak Grove Street, Suite B3, Minneapolis, MN 55403, (612) 874-1509, (612) 874-6693 (legal issues)

Offers a broad base of services and resources for fathers, including support programs, legal assistance, parenting classes, and newsletter.

The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, Charles Ballard, 1090 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20005-4961, (202) 789-6376