

September 17, 2015 Fatherhood Dialogue Letts Community Center

Session Goals

- Create a space for session participants to get to know each other
- Discuss ways to increase supports, information, and connections for fathers to be in even healthier relationships, adopt even more responsible behaviors, and be even more present for their kids

Focus Question

What can we do to make sure that more fathers have the best supports, information and connections for the healthiest relationships, most responsible behaviors, and greatest involvement with their kids?

While the focus question was originally drafted by the session organizers, it was redrafted to the question listed above at the end of the session by the conference participants.

The question was rewritten from the original because fathers already have and do many of the things described in the question. This group can expand from the existing solid base of positive actions, information and connections.

This action of rewriting the question was, in and of itself a collaborative effort of the group to address negative perceptions of fathers, particularly men of color, which was identified in the discussion as a barrier to achieving the focus question.

Participants

Kelsey	McBride	Strong Start Healthy Start
Essid	Couvillion	New Young Fathers
Vijay	Fitzpatrick	
David	Bates	New Young Fathers
MC	Rothhorn	Great Start Ingham
James	Jackson	Involved Dad
Cory	Jamerson	Daddy's Touch Apparel
Cazzie	Avery	
Howard	Spence	Eaton County Commissioner
Theodore	Ransaw	Michigan State University
Steven	Keyton	
Bill	Morris	Butler Corridor Coalition
Randall	Hester	Lansing Schools
Jamison	Givens	

Marice	Benson	
Derrick	Gillian	CACS
Jonathan	Lawrence	Strong Start Healthy Start
Isaias	Solis	Strong Start Healthy Start

Introduction

Jonathan Lawrence opened the session by welcoming participants and explained the importance of their voices in the shaping collaborative, group efforts related to fatherhood. During the individual introductions, it became clear that the individuals in the room represented a wide range of ages and life experiences.

Icebreaker

For the icebreaker exercise, participants exchanged nameplates with someone they didn't know along with three facts about themselves: favorite food, earliest memory of the concept of fatherhood (either in relation to their own father, being a father, or other experiences), and teams they are rooting for this fall. They kept the nameplate of the person they had just met, and then separated and regrouped in another one-on-one exchange of the same topics with a new person, and this time they shared the facts they had just learned about the person whose nameplate they were holding. Then they changed again and repeated the same exercise.

The closing step of the exercise was for everyone to share the three facts about the person whose nameplate they were holding at the end. If they got anything wrong or forgot anything, the owner of the nameplate corrected the information and then got their nameplate back.

Participants shared favorite foods from all vegetables to steak to banana pudding. Memories of fatherhood ranged the rush of emotions at learning they had a baby on the way to "fear" due to losing their own fathers in childhood, to memories of their fathers' physical presence. Memories were shared about growing up with parents with mental illness and stepfathers who cared for and loved them as their own. Team picks spanned locations, divisions and leagues.

Series of Inquiry – Initial Questions

The next phase of the gathering involved group discussion of five questions aimed at helping participants process the focus question through the four-step "series of inquiry" model articulated by the Technology of Participation methodology. The questions and group responses are below.

Thinking back over your time working with your organization, and/or your experiences as a father, what are some of the things that have been the most gratifying for you?

- Helping dads get their kids back (custody/visitation issues)
- Seeing dads who feel successful as they grow and mature into their role and in their lives
- Working with teen dads when they realize there is support and they feel comfortable utilizing that support

Thinking back over your time working with your organization, and/or your experiences as a father, what are some of the things that have been the most gratifying for you?(cont'd)

- Helping teen dads find employment
- Having a dad who, regardless of whatever else was going on with money, work or other issues, showed up for games, events and other important moments
- Realizing that as a dad, you are needed and you can make a profound impact on someone's life
- Having a daughter, who you can both protect and show how to find her own independence
- Teaching your daughter what is good treatment and what is not good treatment in a relationship and how to have appropriate expectations about being treated respectfully
- Teaching daughters to value themselves
- Seeing your kids reach different milestones in life and seeing them succeed
- Being thanked, and specifically told by young dads that your advice and help was priceless to them and that they are in a good place and couldn't have done it without your help
- Learning about yourself
- Coming face-to-face with forgiveness: of your own father for his shortcomings, and of yourself times in the past when you fumbled; ie. when you were hurting or confused and didn't treat people right or did things you knew were wrong, either at that time or looking back on it later. This is hard work and yet the healing that can come from it is essential to being able to be a present and involved father and being able to help other fathers without being weighed down by the anger that can come from that residual pain of the disappointments you have felt in others and yourself.
- Being able to change a teen's language in terms of how he talks about women, through mentoring, and seeing improvements in how he cares for his child
- Being listened to (as a father), being able to teach something, and then seeing your kids do well
- Seeing your kids succeed

On the flipside, what has been the most frustrating?

- We get so busy dealing with stressors from society, and we can forget that the most important thing is showing up for your kid
- Seeing young men trapped – they want to redeem themselves but they are not able to / they are not able to show up for their kids
- As a child, reconciling the person and the parent and the flaws that they may have
- The things kids do to get validation / acknowledgement; destructive behaviors that can get their father's attention even if it's unhealthy, everyone just wants that validation and acknowledgement
- The confusion you experience at the crossroads between being a boy and a man, and not having a man who can guide you across that "bridge" between being a boy and a man
- Having no role model, starting over again
- Not feeling supported during changes in life

- Not knowing how to prioritize and decide how much time to spending working and how much time to spend with kids
- Seeing young teens and young adults having too many kids without the finances in place to support them, which hurts the dads and hurts the kids too
- Not knowing how to relate to your kids sometimes, and those moments where they feel misunderstood and you feel uncertain about how to understand them
- The criminal justice system, Friend of the Court, Child Support and legal system, and especially how they treat men of color and people who don't have a lot of money
- Judges favoring moms and penalizing dads for failing to notify court of custody changes, when dads are the sole caretakers for children for extended periods (years) but then lose their kids when mom moves back, and judges side with moms because dad did not make a formal request for custody change
- Racism & classism in the legal/judicial system

What do you see as obstacles preventing fathers from being in healthy relationships, adopting responsible behaviors, and being present for their kids?

- Fear
- Being a dad and trying to communicating with your child's mom when she doesn't want you involved and/or tries to set extreme limits on your time with your kids
- Skepticism from moms and others
- Trust
- Emotional imbalance from both parents
- Bad relationships between the two parents
- Perceptions of "uninvolved black men" created by and skewed census data on Black single moms, which is that many times there is a man in the picture helping out (whether a partner or a brother, cousin, uncle etc), which may not be reported on surveys due to the economic realities of racial wage differentials, but creates the idea that Black men don't want to be involved or aren't helping out with kids

What is supporting or helping fathers succeed in being in healthy relationships, adopting responsible behaviors, and being present for their kids?

- When, over time, mom and dad gain maturity and are able to be supportive of each other for the best of the child instead of constantly "waging war" with each other
- Being able to communicate well with the other parent
- Both parents putting the kids first
- Being part of a large group of dedicated fathers
- Changing negative images and perceptions of dads
- Working with the Friend of the Court proactively when you know there is a baby on the way and you may have to pay child support, so that you have the upper hand and show yourself to be responsible and taking initiative, and getting on a payment and parenting time plan that you can afford and stick to rather than hiding away from this reality until it causes problems for you, which can include large arrearages, jail time and less time with your child
- Changing views in society about kids actually needing their dads

Series of Inquiry – Conclusion Questions & Focus Question Answers

Typically at this point in group discussion, participants begin drawing some conclusions related to the focus question. At this point in the September 17 fatherhood discussion, however, most participants were ready to brainstorm action items to answer the focus question. The facilitator noted this and asked the group if they wanted to move into the focus question. The consensus was to move into the focus question, but to change it to reflect positive assumptions about the status quo:

What can we do to make sure that more fathers have the best supports, information and connections for the healthiest relationships, most responsible behaviors, and greatest involvement with their kids?

The underlined words were added or modified to express building upon positive behaviors and actions that already exist.

Index cards were distributed with markers and instructions given about how to document action items in small groups. Many ideas were documented on the index cards, and some were documented by the facilitator. Many in the group did not want to end the large group discussion and preferred to brainstorm ideas verbally with the larger group than solely document and discuss ideas in the small group settings.

Time constraints prohibited the step of grouping and analyzing the action items, which could be done at a future session. Some grouping was provided by the facilitator in the ordering of the items below. Notes from the cards and the facilitators' notes include:

- Group actions (rallies, letters, etc) to officials about dads going to jail over child support
- Proactively go to Friend of the Court and set up child support payments if you're going to have a baby without marriage – put yourself in a position of power
- Negotiate child support from a position of power at pregnancy or shortly after birth
- Cash for commitment program – child support debt forgiveness for completion of a year of fatherhood classes or programming
- Network – Other programs – All Fathers Matter
- A million father march to the Capitol #allfathersmatter (mentioned on multiple cards)
- Create a hashtag #allfathersmatter (mentioned on multiple cards)
- More teaching for dads while moms are pregnant about “What To Do”
- Beginning a birth, provide clear outreach and support for young children, modeling mature parent behavior, while providing access and advocacy for young and emergent parents
- Weekly fatherhood meeting with good attendance
- Game day events with dads, featuring important info (ie working with Friend of Court to set up support proactively)
- Mentoring
- Give dads another chance – forgive
- Learn to trust dads beyond mistakes

- Make sure we show visually that dads matter: billboards, school programs, social media, churches
- Asset mapping (Community members can provide knowledge about their individual assets and community assets. Participatory Asset Mapping is a process where they specifically identify Community Assets, which include citizen associations and local institutions.)
- Identify 1 (2 max) barrier(s) to dismantle (over specific time)

Conclusion

The final wrap-up was a one-word summary from each person about how they were feeling at the close of the discussion. Closing words included “motivated”, “happy”, “determined”, “persistent”, “relieved”, and “hopeful”.

Jonathan Lawrence thanked the participants for coming together and said there would be follow up from him to set up another gathering for the purpose of moving forward on the issues and action items developed by the group.

In debriefing later with the facilitator, it became clear that a large “conference” may not be the best vehicle to move forward on the concerns and action items stated, but rather other more targeted, frequent, and specifically focused efforts.

A “validation” session is recommended where participants can review the components of the report and comment on what was documented properly and what needs to be adjusted, and given the time to reflect since the original gathering, what they would like to do next.