Project Fatherhood: Fathers as a Solution

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Fathers are a largely untapped resource for supporting healthy child development (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). Despite their tremendous potential, fathers are generally not engaged in programs designed to strengthen at-risk families (Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series, 2006; Malm et al., 2006). Some programs are open to father involvement, but in most cases programs do not address the unique perspectives men have as parents or the social stigmas or attitudes associated with their role in child development. Fathers—particularly those from urban and low-income backgrounds—are all too often mistakenly dismissed as disengaged and irrelevant, and as a result no explicit effort is made to involve them in family services.

At Project FatherhoodSM, our experience is that most men are eager to participate in raising their children but are often prevented from effectively doing so by poor social and economic conditions, negative cultural and legal biases, and challenges stemming from their life experiences, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, or the absence of a positive male role model. These obstacles create a vicious generational cycle of absentee fatherhood that we believe can be broken by providing services and support that are sensitive to the unique needs of fathers and their children.

The Project Fatherhood Model

In the early 1990s, Children’s Institute, Inc. (CII) had a residential shelter for infants and toddlers who had been abused or neglected, often related to parental substance abuse or prenatal exposure to drugs. Most of these children lived in households with single mothers and had little, if any, contact with their fathers before they arrived at the shelter. CII reached out to the fathers and began the process of engaging them in the lives of their children. In time, many of these men wanted custody of their children, but most were denied due to the legal system’s concerns about single fathering absent professional involvement and support. In 1996, CII created Project Fatherhood to address these concerns and help the fathers gain custody of their children.

From the beginning, the goal of Project Fatherhood was to support child development by increasing the positive involvement of fathers in parenting their children. Specifically, the project aims to decrease physical and emotional father absence; ensure that fathers are emotionally and financially supportive parents; and help fathers focus on the child’s needs as the top priority. We believe that all fathers can and do love their children and want the best for them. However, while fatherhood itself is a near universal experience for men, the experiences, knowledge, and skills that fathers bring to parenting vary dramatically. Project Fatherhood supports and empowers fathers by encouraging them to honestly address the core issues of their lives, which may include substance abuse, failed relationships, or a childhood history of abuse and/or neglect. By engaging these issues, fathers can then build their parenting skills and begin to play a critical role in supporting their children’s healthy emotional, cognitive, and physical development.

Components of the Model

The Project Fatherhood model includes three core components: the Men in Relationships GroupSM (MIRG), the Children’s Group, and vocational support. Project Fatherhood also strives to address family needs by providing additional, individualized services, such as one-on-one therapy or family enrichment activities.
The Children’s Group. While many other fatherhood programs focus on the fathers’ needs in the hope that improved functioning will indirectly impact the child, Project Fatherhood immediately and directly addresses the needs of children through the Children’s Group. After joining Project Fatherhood, children are screened for psychosocial issues that may require referrals for additional assessment or treatment. Next, children join the ongoing Children’s Group, which runs concurrent with the MIRG Groups. Children participate in a variety of activities—including art, yoga, and other enrichment activities—designed to support all aspects of child development, with particular emphasis on social-emotional development and building a developmentally appropriate emotional vocabulary. These groups serve as an interim scaffold to support the child’s development while the father addresses his own issues and builds parenting skills that will become the lifelong support for the child.

Vocational Support. Project Fatherhood emphasizes the importance of children seeing their fathers as a financial support (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Therefore, ensuring that fathers are gainfully employed and able to provide for their family is a significant component of the intervention. Job search and vocational readiness training activities range from information and referral offered by Project Fatherhood participants to more intensive support from program staff, either through a structured Job Club (Azrin, 1980) or a financial literacy course.
positive fathers to their children. They are then able to
directly address any concerns of interested and new partic-
ipants and can also normalize for them the experience of
struggling with parenthood.

Sharing the experience of Project Fatherhood has also
been effective in building a base of referring agencies.
Project Fatherhood regularly conducts five-day Training
Institutes on the program model to create community
awareness of the unique benefits of father involvement
and the value of fatherhood services. During the training,
participants learn about the program model and also
engage in a group process that closely parallels the Project
Fatherhood experience. Subsequently, trainees are more
likely to refer fathers to Project Fatherhood, and a signifi-
cant number of them also develop Project Fatherhood
groups at their own organization. To date, more than 150
social service professionals representing more than 90
organizations have participated in the trainings.

The Impact of Project Fatherhood

In the past 12 years, over 7,000 fathers and their families
have participated in Project Fatherhood activities. Our
primary indicator of success is the number of fathers who
are involved in raising their children. To date, over 90%
of participating fathers have visitation with their children.
We are currently in the process of conducting an outcome
evaluation of Project Fatherhood and look forward to
sharing results of this study at a future date.

The Future of Project Fatherhood

Our vision is for Project Fatherhood to be available to all
fathers in need of support, regardless of socioeconomic
status, ethnicity, language, or location. This goal is best
described by Project Fatherhood’s founder, Dr. Hershel
Swinger: “Imagine if the program were like McDonald’s—
a facility on every corner for fathers to avail themselves of,
should the need arise.”

Project Fatherhood was therefore designed to be
replicated by other organizations, ranging from large,
multi-site social service organizations to small communi-
ty-based agencies. In support of this mission, Project
Fatherhood received a grant from the federal govern-
ment’s Administration for Children and Families to
provide small grants to community-based agencies,
including faith-based agencies, to replicate the program
with their constituencies. The project has been a
tremendous success with more than 20 agencies in the Los
Angeles area that have launched their own groups under
this new funding stream. Through these groups, Project
Fatherhood has become available to a broad range of
populations, including Latino, Cambodian, and indigenous
families, fathers with special needs, and families in faith-
based communities.

Our aim is to continue to spread awareness of father-
hood issues and rally communities to increase the avail-
ability of fatherhood services. We envision a network of
family support resources and services that are seamlessly
integrated into the community, rather than a separate and
stigmatizing place where only families in trouble go to
seek help. Through Project Fatherhood services and sup-
ports, we believe that men can learn to be engaged in the
care and nurture of their children and to break the cycle
of absentee fatherhood.

ABOUT CII

Children’s Institute, Inc. is one of the nation’s premier
children’s service organizations. For more than a hundred
years, CII has helped children and families throughout Los
Angeles County recover from the trauma of domestic and
community violence. For more information, visit
www.childrensinstitute.org.

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