
Involving Men in Nurturing

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**The reality is that “parent” is still usually taken as a code word for “mother.”
When “parenting groups” are advertised, they are usually understood as invitations to women.
And when “parenting research is done, it is usually heavily biased towards mothers.
The only way to find out what was happening for the “invisible parent” in American was to point the
spotlight directly and specifically at him ...
Nurturing isn’t just something fathers do, but something that men do.**

James Levine, Director, The Fatherhood Project
Fatherhood USA, Klinman, D. and Kohl, R., 1984

**When men abandon the upbringing of their children to their wives, a big loss is suffered by themselves.
For what they lose is the possibility of growth in themselves for being human,
which the stimulation of bringing up one’s children gives.**

Anthropologist Ashley Montague, 1964

Currently, Male Involvement in Nurturing Programs is Limited

Despite the fact that the Nurturing Program model’s principal author (like that of most other parenting programs) is a man and a father, and despite the model’s emphasis on working with entire families, many Nurturing Programs still include only a few fathers. Some programs never include men, but there are a number which have been very successful in including fathers and other men involved in children’s lives.

The reasons for this lack of inclusion of men are multiple and complex. Probably the most central of these is the deeply felt and long-standing societal stance – held by men and women, by parents and facilitators alike – that nurturing is a female characteristic and that parenting is women’s business. This is beginning to change, but very slowly. Only recently has research published in books or journals begun examining the positive outcomes of fathering in the lives of children and families. In contrast, there is much speculation and some research about the damaging effects of dysfunctional fathering and the absent father, and about the treatment of men for domestic and other violence. The media have focused almost exclusively on the absent father (“deadbeat dad”) and all but overlooked the equally – and perhaps more powerful force – of the newly committed and nurturing father.

With the great increase in the number of divorced, separated and never-married mothers in our society, there has been an assumption that fathers and other men have little involvement with childrearing, little influence and little interest in the subject. Yet those of us who work with these families recognize how many men are, in fact, involved in the lives of these mothers and children, as divorced or never-married fathers, as stepfathers and boyfriends, as foster parents and grandfathers. There are also single parent fathers.

Divorced and separated fathers still have a major impact on kids and family life. They need recognition, encouragement and training to remain involved. The courts still make the divorced father’s role difficult, though this too is improving. Those of us who work with families recognize the great potential for stress in the blended and step-family, whether or not formalized by marriage, and there are now a great number of children living in these types of family situations.

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Why This is a Critically Important Issue

Men's influence on children is profound – for good and for ill. Some experts in early childhood education have begun to recognize a profound impact of the father's presence, especially in the development of positive gender identity. There is beginning to be some research interest in the positive impact of fathering on child development. However, there seems to be a lot more focus on the influence of abusive, incestuous, emotionally distant, and alcoholic or absent fathers.

Recent studies, like Wallerstein's Second Chances: Men, Women and Children a Decade After Divorce, have concerned themselves with the impact of loss of the father-child relationship. When children have poor relationships with their fathers, they tend to suffer "downward mobility" and a host of other problems relating to low self-esteem, such as learning and school problems, behavior and emotional problems, and drug and alcohol abuse. This poor sense of self often results from their parents' battles, their sense of rejection and other unresolved issues in their father-child relationships.

On the other hand, when divorces and separations are properly handled, and fathers are helped to stay involved with their children, the results can be very positive. Many experts believe that post-divorce families can and should be helped to form a new and healthy family system, since divorce isn't the end of the relationship. Even though the parents are divorcing each other, they are not divorcing their children. The family is still a family, though undergoing a transition and transformation.

There are twenty-four armed conflicts in the world today, costing \$2 million per minute and a quarter to a half a million lives a year. The vast majority of the combatants are men; the vast majority of the casualties are women and children. James Barbarino, one of the world's leading experts in child abuse and neglect, calls war "the ultimate form of child abuse" and has said that "the face of war is the face of men." In the "war at home," one half of the perpetrators of child abuse and neglect are men, and a large majority of the sexual abusers of children are men.

If so much violence and abuse is perpetrated by men, should not our prevention efforts, which are aimed at reducing violence and abuse, be directed to men? If the primary lessons about self-worth, empathy and mutual respect, conflict resolution and discipline are learned from the significant adults in one's early life, shouldn't the men involved in children's lives be helped to model appropriate behaviors in caring for and interacting with others?

A Milwaukee, Wisconsin expert in treating domestic violence and preventing child abuse, Ben Ortega, notes that "Power and control issues are very important to men in this society. I have no problem with this as long as power and control are applied to ourselves as individuals, not forced upon others. Our society must accept the premise that men are capable of nurturing and of handing down these skills to their sons and daughters, as well as applying them to their partners, friends, relatives and even strangers." Men's nurturing enriches children's development by broadening and enhancing the nurturing they receive from women.

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What We Can Do About It

Nurturing Program providers will have to begin communicating and demonstrating to men that they are valuable, not only for their capacity to produce economically, but also in terms of their capacity to parent. This requires both attitudinal and behavioral changes on the part of Nurturing Program planners and facilitators. It means that we will have to learn about, and teach women and men about, the influence of fathers in the lives and development of children. In his book The Nurturing Father, Kyle Pruett, M.D., states: "Father presence and effectiveness must also be part of the formal curriculum. (Instructional materials) must be carefully chosen to include fathers in nurturing and caretaking roles, as well as those of the more traditional hunter-gatherer."

Most people find it hard to go where they do not feel accepted, welcomed and valued. Men have not traditionally been welcomed into this female domain. If we truly want men's participation in nurturing, we must take a hard look at our answers to these questions:

When men look at advertising and outreach materials for Nurturing Programs, what images do they see of men parenting?

- When men think about attending their first session, how many other men do they imagine meeting there?
- What kind of reception do they anticipate from the facilitators, who are usually female? From female participants? Do they trust that their presence will be valued as much as the presence of the women?
- Can they expect to find any male role models there? Will there be nurturing male facilitators to lead the way?
- Are they worried about having to sit through a lot of uncomfortable touchy-feely exercises or lengthy discussions from the perspective of women?
- Do they expect the topics to have relevance to their lives and needs?
- Do they believe that program personnel will support their ways of caring for their children, ways that might differ from the mothers' methods? Will their uniquely male styles of nurturing be allowed?

Nurturing Program materials do show men and boys in nurturing activities as often as girls and women, and male facilitators work with both children and adults. However, the ratio of male facilitators to female facilitators, whether paid or volunteer, is very, very low in most Nurturing Programs.

It is not entirely clear why men do not volunteer in greater numbers to work in parenting education, since approximately half of the people who serve as volunteers in this country are men. Most male volunteers want to work with youth in some kind of guidance or teaching capacity. Perhaps the terms "parenting" or "nurturing" discourage them, for the social reasons outlined previously.

Female facilitators generally seem to welcome the presence of male *facilitators* and value them as colleagues and important role models. However, it's not as easy for female facilitators to accept the presence of men as program *participants*.

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Program coordinators often express concern and discomfort with making extra efforts and designing outreach and programming that would encourage boyfriends, husbands and fathers to attend. They acknowledge, as one put it, "...that it is important for men to be involved in Nurturing Programs to work on themselves and their personal growth, and to think about their influence on their children."

Female coordinators and facilitators worry that women, many of whom have been abused by men, might not be able to express themselves freely in mixed groups, and that they (the female facilitators) might not be able to cope with their own reactions to men's anger or threatening physical presence. These concerns will have to be dealt with if we are to include fathers and father surrogates in our parent groups.

If we are serious about providing boys and girls with nurturing male role models, we will have to provide venues where men who "haven't had everyday heroes in their childhoods (and who are) starved for guidance, for friendship, for brotherhood," can acquire the "knowledge of how to be strong and male without being weak, aggressive and abusive." (The Grown-up Man, J. Friel, 1991).

This means involving men as *full-fledged participants and as facilitators with both adults and children*. It means making a place for those men everywhere who are inspired to leadership in nurturing and supporting them as they take the risk to be on the cutting edge of societal change.

Overcoming the Barriers to Participation

We May Need an Attitude Adjustment

As with any change, attitudes shift first and behavior follows later, sometimes much later. Widespread changes are occurring quickly in the "culture" of fathering, but changes in the "conduct" of fathering lag behind. We now regularly see images of men directly involved with childrearing on TV, in movies, and in advertising. Even so, James Levine, Director of the Fatherhood Project, tempers optimism with realism when he reminds us: "Fatherhood is in the midst of an evolution, not a revolution. We shouldn't be discouraged by the accordingly glacial pace of change."

- In changing attitudes the most effective strategy is always to start with oneself, one's values and prejudices, and one's own circle of influence.
- Are you in touch with your own feelings and biases about allowing men to share equally the nurturing domain with women? To enjoy the same intimacy and strength of attachment that many mothers experience with their children?
- Do you believe that men are truly capable of nurturing?
- Can you appreciate that men's nurturing styles may differ from women's and still be beneficial for children?
- Are you angry with or afraid of men? Are there some issues you need to resolve in order to work effectively and caringly with men in the program?

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New Information Can Help

Educators and social workers are beginning to recognize that when fathers are engaged and nurturing, teach and model good behavior, their contributions to child development and well-being are powerful and significant. Recent research on father-child involvement – which is very well summarized in Working with Fathers: Methods and Perspectives from the Minnesota Fathering Alliance – demonstrates that:

- **Fathers are significant.** Where fathers have played an active care giving role, infants can recognize their pictures and react equally to separations from both parents.
- **Fathers are sensitive.** Fathers adjust their speech when conversing with young children, just as mothers do. They demonstrate sensitivity to infant distress and can discriminate between different types of infant crying patterns.
- **Fathers' play is different.** They tend to be more physical and rousing in play (especially with their sons). Fathers tend to be more tactile, as they move their infant's feet and hands rhythmically, while mothers tend to emphasize verbal play and interaction.
- **Fathers are nurturing.** Infants are capable of forming multiple attachment relationships, and they cope better with stress if their fathers have taken an active part in their early care. Father nurturance appears to have a positive influence on achievement and peer popularity in boys and personal adjustment in girls. High paternal affection and altruism appear to be associated with the development of prosocial behavior in boys. Nurturing fathers provide their daughters with a positive model of relationship with opposite sex.

It is important that nurturing Program staff and participants have access to this type of information, which can help legitimize and support the inclusion of men in nurturing.

- **Reach Out and Extend a Real Invitation.** If you really want them, they will come – but first you must let them know that their presence is enthusiastically sought and truly welcomed.
- **In Outreach Flyers and Brochures.** Include pictures of men in nurturing relationships to children. There are plenty of these images available as print or digital clip art.
- **Describe your Program using Language and Metaphors that Attract Men.** For instance, focus on "opinions" "ideas" "techniques" and "solutions" as opposed to "sharing of concerns" and "getting help." Let men know, for instance, that by attending they will be adding to their "toolbox of discipline techniques," that the program will provide them with "the tools they need to do the best possible job as parents."

Be aware that men are uncomfortable with the notion of seeking help, so leave out references to "help" and anything else that might imply an inadequacy or deficit on their part.

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- **In Outreach to Referral Sources.** Make it clear to your referral sources that this is a *family*-based program, and that you mean to include biological dad, step dads, granddads, weekend dads, and live-in boyfriends – any man who is regularly in the kids’ picture at present or will be in the near future. Tell them why you think this is important and how it will help the family succeed in incorporating nurturing skills into their everyday life. Mention this policy on your outreach materials to referral sources.
- **In the Inquiry Phone Call.** Often it is the mother who makes the first contact with a Nurturing Program. Whoever calls, be sure to ask early on about the other adults in the household. If a woman says, “My husband is too busy, so it will just be me and the kids” or “I have a boyfriend but he’s only here on the weekends, and anyway he’s not their father,” gently explain the program’s philosophy of including the significant men in children’s lives and the reason for it. Point out that it will be much easier for her to make the changes she wants in her family if she has his “buy-in” and cooperation, if they have heard the same information and problem-solved together.

If she says that she will just share the information with him at home, remind her of how hard it is to try to learn to drive from a parent or spouse: generally both novice driver and teacher get nervous and testy, which does no good for the relationship.

Sometimes you may get the feeling that something else is an issue, for example, alcoholism or spousal violence, and is the reason she wants to attend without him. You may need to probe delicately to ascertain the problem, and then you will have a judgment call to make.

If a man calls, do not simply assume that he is calling “for his wife.” Perhaps he is the one in the couple who is really bent on improving his family life. He could be a single parent, single custodial, joint custodial or non-custodial father, or single foster father. He may also have a girlfriend who is not related to his child(ren).

In any event, do your very best to set up the Family Enrollment Interview with all potential participants – adults and children. You can always make the decision not to enroll a partner later, during or after the meeting. Be kind and polite but quite insistent that everyone needs to be there; make sure it is scheduled when and where everyone can attend. Ask the caller to explain to his/her partner about the program and the Family Enrollment Interview.

Follow up by sending a flyer or brochure to the family with *both* individuals’ names on it. You may do well to call within 24 hours of the interview to confirm the meeting. Take this opportunity to ask whether the family received the material and whether both of the adults have had a chance to review it. Restate how much you are looking forward to meeting both partners.

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- **In the Family Enrollment Interview.** It's best to have a male facilitator – or both a male and a female – present at the interviews where a man is part of the family. If that is not possible, you have several options:
 - 1) Include a male parent program graduate as co-facilitator of the interview.
 - 2) Mention that the team of facilitators includes both men and women.
 - 3) Make a point of telling the man that he will not be the only male participant.
- Be sure to attend to the man as well as the woman during the interview. During the interview, greet him immediately, make eye contact, lean toward him attentively, and so forth. When you ask questions about the family – the children, their interest in the program, their willingness to schedule and commit to it – address the questions to him as well as to her.
- Let the man know that you think he plays a major role in the process of family development and why it is important that he attend the program. (So he will have his needs taken into account, have input in any changes in family rules, learn new discipline techniques that he and she can apply together, learn new solutions to and be part of resolving conflicts, enhance communications with his partner, and with the children etc.).
- Mention that it can strengthen the couple's relationship if both are "on the same page" when it comes to parenting, because conflicts around child rearing are a primary source of marital problems.
- Emphasize the active and structured nature of the program, especially the practical problem-solving, simulation games (ex: the Towel Pull and the Body Bubble), "skill practice" opportunities (avoid calling it "role-playing"), and the parent-child activity time.
- Review the voluntary nature of participation in all discussions and activities during the sessions. When discussing confidentiality, mention that participants in the program may choose to relate some of their own experiences. (Avoid using the word "sharing" as in "sharing feelings and concerns").
- Appreciate him for the time he is taking for the program and for his commitment to enhancing the life of his family – but be sure you are not overdoing it, being patronizing or overly solicitous. Recognize that he may face some barriers with regard to his work schedule and commitments in order to attend. (This may be true for the women as well, who should also receive consideration and recognition for her efforts on her family's behalf. However, since a man's traditional commitment to family centers on breadwinning, in reordering his work vs. Nurturing Program priorities, he may be stretching his identity more than she is).

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Make the Environment and Activities “Man-Friendly”

- **Make sure chairs are comfortable for men, and that the room décor and materials reflect a male presence.** If you hang up posters, find some that show men nurturing children and women. Nurturing Program videos, handbooks and other instructional materials picture fathers as often as mothers, but if you bring in other materials and literature, be sure to balance those that are addressed to women with those addressed to men.
- **Keep it moving and active.** It has been our experience that men are as responsive to nurturing Program activities as women, especially when the facilitators are good at maximizing the experiential and hands-on nature of the curriculum. As was previously mentioned, emphasize skill-building and practice. At the beginning of your program, emphasize gross motor activities and big group games with the children during Family Nurturing Time, only later introducing fine motor activities (like finger plays and nursery rhymes.)
- **Respond to men’s expressed desire for factual information, solutions, leadership, structure and purpose.** Many men will want to know before engaging in an activity that the activity has a goal and utility. They may be more insistent than women that the sessions be well-organized and the leadership clearly in charge. Some men may be concerned that sessions will not provide a practical information and solutions and end up as “just a bull or gripe session.” When men question you about these matters, give them straight answers; do not assume that they are personally challenging you or attacking the program.
- **Support male ways of nurturing children.** Help mothers let go, both emotionally and intellectually, of their “standards of performance” for fathers and share the parenting domain more equitably. (Is it really more important that a child has her nap at the usual time or that she make a good connection with her father? Is mother willing to keep “hands off,” to really allow father enough time and caretaking responsibility for him to learn his child’s rhythm and needs?) Help men and women learn about and appreciate the special and unique skills men bring to relationships with children. Expand the definition of “nurturing” to incorporate these.
- **Obtain - and share with your participants and facilitators – information about gender differences in communication styles, ways of thinking about moral choices and values, and ways of approaching tasks.** For example, men may be uncomfortable with women’s intense expression of emotion, because many men have been socialized to respond to whatever is wrong by “fixing” it, by finding a practical solution right away. Women, on the other hand, often just want to be able to explore and express their feelings fully, be listened to and cared about – and may or may not be ready to quickly move on to dealing with practical problem-solving. Some preparation on these topics should be included in facilitator training.
- **Support men’s self-expression.** The prevailing wisdom is that men will have greater difficulty than women in accessing their feelings, and be more reticent to talk about them. That is not precisely our experience. When facilitators provide safety and permission, men really appreciate and take advantage of the

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opportunity Nurturing Programs provide for reflecting on their own upbringing and relationships with their parents.

At the beginning, until men come to trust the group rules, learn the program functions, and feel valued as people and as parents, they may choose to express themselves through the socially prescribed channels for males, such as anger, argumentativeness or indifference to the themes of “nurturing” “parenting” “feeling your feelings” etc. Follow the Nurturing Program instructional strategy of starting out with low-risk activities and then gently increase the level of challenge as bonds and trust build in the group.

Of course, if you want men to be able to express and explore their feelings, be sure that you can hear and accept their perspectives on their lives. Men need friendship, compassion and understanding – even when they have been perpetrators of abuse. Keep in mind that, for the most part, perpetrators of violence are grown-up victims. Also, remember that sexual, spousal and other violence against men may be under reported because men are socialized not to disclose such experiences lest they appear weak, or less than manly.

All men have feelings, but they may have had little experience articulating them. Remember that there is a difference between listening for feelings and asking for feelings. Listen actively, acknowledging feelings when you hear them, and in this way increase men’s comfort with using a feelings vocabulary. The Nurturing Program convention of having facilitators also self-disclose reinforces men’s permission to speak, especially if this is modeled by a male facilitator.

- **Help men learn to nurture themselves.** The Nurturing Program’s emphasis on adults’ meeting their own needs can be tricky for men. Many have had very little practice at self-care, so lack the skills. Many men believe others (principally women) should take care of them. Some men may find self-nurturing a challenging notion, yet it is a very important area for learning and growth, so take it slow but stick with it.
- **Do not assume that only mothers are in charge of certain parenting functions** such as parent-teacher conferences, doctor visits, child care arrangements, meal preparation and so forth.
- **Separate male and female participants for some activities. Customize some activities or offer a “men-only” Nurturing Program.** Depending on the level of trust in the group between men and women and within couples, you may want to split the group for such activities as the Body Map and discussions of sexuality. Be aware that men as well as women can be harboring painful issues around their bodies, including emotional and physical scars resulting from fights, physical and sexual abuse – which they may or may not choose to disclose.

There are benefits to both mixed gender and single gender discussions. Mixed groups can provide valuable experiences for both men and women, especially when there are skilled facilitators who can help them work through gender stereotypes and conflicts. Same sex groups offer unique growth opportunities because of the shared perspective and experiences arising from common socialization. Use your judgment about the participants’ needs; you can take

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advantage of both possibilities within the Nurturing Program as traditionally structured.

You can also introduce new activities specifically designed to help male (and female) participants think through the fathering role and deal with other issues pertinent to men and nurturing. Some organizations are successfully experimenting with all male nurturing groups. The **“Nurturing Father’s Program”** has been developed by Nurturing Program National Trainer/Consultant Mark Perlman. For more information, visit www.nurturingfathers.com.

Employ Male Facilitators

Men will feel more at ease and deepen their learning in a group where men are also facilitators. In addition, adult female participants – as well as children and adolescents of both sexes – can benefit greatly from the presence of nurturing male facilitators. The modeling that occurs when male and female facilitators work together as a team is a powerful educational tool in and of itself. So, if you are seriously committed to including men as full partners in parenting and to providing a true family-systems program, you will need to have male staff – paid and volunteer.

The same principles apply to recruiting men as facilitators as recruiting them as participants. You have to want to and be willing to make some adjustments in the way your program operates. Nationally, men volunteer in the same numbers that women do, but you may need to reach them through different venues and with different language.

There are many men in helping positions – teachers, church youth group leaders, recreation leaders, coaches, scout leaders, social workers, substance abuse counselors. Many men look for opportunities to work with children. If you offer excellent training and supervision, many men will see the Nurturing Program as a golden opportunity to build some serious group work and teaching skills in a very dynamic multi-family setting. Look, too, at your male program graduates who have leadership potential and who would make good facilitators, with appropriate training. Talk to men in your area and find out what might be attractive to them about working the Nurturing Program – and what might hold them back.

If your organization is willing to start the process by committing some effort, thought and time to it – and perhaps a little money initially – there is no reason why you cannot have a reasonably balanced team of male and female facilitators.