Home Visiting and Fatherhood
Johnny Wilson – FATHERS NEW MEXICO
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NMAIMH competencies addressed:
Theoretical Foundations
- Family relationships & dynamics
Working with Others
- Building & maintaining relationships
Reflection
- Contemplation
- Curiosity

There is substantial research that indicates the value of engaged dads with their children. In particular, dad involvement in the lives of their children has been associated with improvements in a number of early childhood indicators such as school readiness, size of a child’s vocabulary, and emotional regulation.

Many of our support systems have not caught up with the research on dad involvement. Dads frequently report feeling as if they are treated with suspicion in daycare centers and schools. Program staff often refer to the aggregate of the parents they work with as “moms” and agencies commonly have literature that identifies the need to support moms. Indeed, the Women, Infant and Children program is a perfect illustration of what family services look like to dads, who largely feel as if they are standing on the periphery.

The waiting rooms of many family and child centered services tend to have images, messages and brochures that are gender-typical for women. These are some considerations that can be addressed if we want to include and help dads feel welcomed. Noticing the messages we convey is vital, whether intentionally designed or not. We all must make adjustments to be inclusive of fathers, which is an important first step to welcoming fathers.

It is vital that society continues to reach out and provide services to moms, and, improve the quality and availability of services for moms. Simultaneously, it is equally important that we begin to focus on what fathers need in order to be supportive of dads. Examining exactly how we can connect with dads is fundamental to providing that support.

Home visiting programs have a unique opportunity to impact dads in a positive way. Like moms, dads have positive instincts and a deeply felt dedication to their children, but often suffer from insecurity and uncertainty. The reassurance and coaching offered by home visiting programs can fill the important role of reinforcing a father’s positive inclinations while assisting him to identify areas for improvement.
In order to have the positive impact that home visiting programs have the potential of realizing with dads, programs must invest effort and resources into learning about fathers, some of the unique qualities fathers bring, and about the dynamics between mothers and fathers. Though generalized gender differences in parenting are never absolutes, and ought not be expected, considering tendencies can be very helpful both to identify the unique strengths of both moms and dads, and to help parenting partners appreciate each other’s strengths.

For many families it is possible to schedule visits when both parents are home. Though it will commonly require additional up front communication and arrangements, finding the opportunity to include dad can provide home visitors with a wealth of additional information with which to determine family needs and provide the information that will be the most supportive of baby’s growth and development.

Dads who are available at a home visit may appear hesitant and uncomfortable with the home visiting staff and the activities presented. Those dads who are simply not present during a home visit may not be there due to their job schedules. One recommendation is to give fathers the benefit of the doubt. Do not assume that a dad’s reticence, or even absence, is because of complacency or a lack of engagement with his child. Even if mom is telling a story that appears to confirm such a perspective, she may be speaking from a place of frustration or anxiety that makes it difficult for her to see the actual barriers her child’s dad is experiencing.

Some of the gender normative challenges that fathers exhibit can be significant challenges to home visiting programs. When program staff take the time to learn about the expectations that many men have of themselves, they will develop compassion for the dads they interact with and have more understanding of the challenges that they experience. For example, males in our society are taught NOT to ask for help, that needing help is an admission of weakness and that they should be able to take care of most anything on their own. On the face of it, this is clearly ridiculous; however, it is a message sent in myriad ways throughout a boy's development and becomes deeply ingrained. That is why Fathers New Mexico recommends that program staff be prepared to find multiple ways to invite dad into the programmatic milieu, to expect to have to repeat all invitations multiple times, and to express appreciation and encouragement for each small step he takes towards engagement.

It is also very helpful for staff to appreciate the messages that men have received regarding parenting. One example is the "provider and protector" messages. If a dad has internalized these messages as the top priority for a dad, it may appear as if his focus is exclusively on work, and it may even seem as if he prefers to be absent from the home and from his child. The persistent invitations, and helping mom to appreciate the potential value of inviting and encouraging dad’s bonding with baby, can help give him permission to explore the other vital gifts he has to offer.

If dad is currently unable to be present during home visits, ask if there are other ways you can provide him information. Also, talk with mom about how dad can support home visiting objectives. Give her ideas about collaborative engagement with their child. Help mom see the unique value of dad’s approach.

As with all family service work, the home visiting professional must rigorously maintain their objectivity. Social and family communications to boys and men often convey messages that include a lack of faith in men’s capacity or willingness to parent. Men want to parent but often have to work against these internalized messages, as well as ongoing social messaging about their lack of devotion, skills and willingness to “stick around”. Despite this messaging, the vast
majority of men really do want to be involved with their children and feel the same deep, heartfelt devotion to their kids that moms feel.

It is important to recognize that the field of home visiting is largely staffed by women. It would be helpful for programs to make a concerted effort to recruit more male home visitors. However, even with current staff, it is very possible to realize sincere engagement and support for dads. Reframing home visiting as a collaborative effort where fathers have much to offer can change the perspective to one of strengths as opposed to needs.

Written by Johnny Wilson for the NM Home Visiting Program

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- What does your agency messaging (website, brochures, etc.) reflect about expectations of father involvement in home visiting, both visually and in written form?
- What training or resources are available to home visitors regarding parental differences and/or similarities between fathers and mothers?
- During reflective supervision, consider and ask about father availability during home visits, or ways to obtain father's input, concerns and contributions.

References/Additional Resources [Arial 10 pt.]