It was nearly 30 years ago that leading child psychologist Michael E. Lamb (1975) reminded us that fathers are the “forgotten contributors to child development.” Since then, much work has been done to explore the ways fathers make unique contributions to the healthy development of their children. Researchers know that boys and girls of all races and all socioeconomic groups who grow up with an involved father have stronger cognitive and motor skills, enjoy elevated levels of physical and mental health, and become better and more confident problem-solvers. They demonstrate more curiosity and empathy and show greater moral sensitivity and self-control.

Fathers can help a Head Start program be more effective at promoting children’s development and learning. And at the same time, a Head Start program can help fathers be more effective in their children’s lives. To help a program increase effective father involvement, the Head Start Bureau has developed a very important resource, The Building Blocks for Father Involvement. This series of five booklets will assist any Head Start program in developing and sustaining a fatherhood involvement program. The Building Blocks can help programs understand why fathers are essential for healthy child development and then begin to grow and sustain their fatherhood involvement programs and evaluate their efforts. The Building Blocks are useful for Head Starts that are at the initial stages of building a fatherhood program as well as for those whose fatherhood programs are well-established.

The Building Blocks for Father Involvement consists of

Building Block 1—Appreciating How Fathers Give Children a Head Start
The first booklet in the series surveys the sociological, psychological, and medical research on how father involvement uniquely benefits child well-being. It is important that Head Start staff and parents understand why fathers are essential. This knowledge will provide the drive and conviction needed to press on in this important work. Included in Building Block 1 is a reading list on the topic of why fathers matter.

Building Block 2—First Thoughts on Getting Fathers Involved in Head Start
Building Block 2 explores important questions and obstacles a Head Start program must address and overcome as well as steps in planning an effective fatherhood project. It offers guidance in understanding Head Start fathers and how a successful program can involve them. Attention is given to breaking down unintentional, but very real, programmatic barriers that might keep fathers from becoming involved.

Building Block 3 – Building a Foundation to Work with Fathers
The first two Building Blocks are prep work to get ready for Building Block 3: establishing a fatherhood program. The first step is exploring the six stages of becoming a father-friendly program. The second step is understanding the qualities of a successful fatherhood program and how to incorporate them into a new system. Included in Building Block 3 is a tool for assessing the father-friendliness of a program and an Action Plan for becoming more father-friendly. This booklet also offers ideas for securing the key resources to make a father involvement program happen: money, staff, and community partners.

The Building Blocks will help Head Start programs develop and sustain father involvement.
THE BUILDING BLOCKS

Building Block 4—Planning for Success

After establishing the foundation of successful father involvement work, programs begin to erect the structure for this work. Studies of program effectiveness show that when fatherhood programs fail, it is because they are not planned properly. This problem is avoided by smart planning.

Building Block 4 describes the organizational structure of a successful fatherhood program and includes a Program Planning Worksheet. The Worksheet serves as the guiding document and outline for a program’s budding fatherhood project. The booklet also poses critical questions which Head Start programs must address for smart planning:

• Who are the fathers in your program?
• What are their needs?
• Why are these fathers not involved in the lives of their children?
• What activities can improve father involvement?

Building Block 5—Bringing a Fatherhood Plan to Life

All the background learning, planning, and organizational strategizing are important work and have been done in Building Blocks 1-4. The final booklet, Building Block 5, starts the real fun—implementing all the ideas and plans that have been developed. Included are creative ideas for building child-awareness in fathers and helping men connect with their children in meaningful ways. There is also a list of age-appropriate, everyday father-child activities. A bibliography of books that fathers can share with their children is provided.

Other important resources that contribute to increased fatherhood involvement in Head Start programs are discussed: healthy mother/father relationships, full staff support, staff sensitivity to cultural issues, and staff openness to working with fathers. Building Block 5 also provides information about conducting an ongoing evaluation of the fatherhood project so that constant program improvement is made easier.

REFERENCES


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