

OFA Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Grant: Summary of Lessons Learned

By Jan Watson



Parents as Teachers™

During the last five years we have had the privilege of partnering with selected Parents as Teachers sites through the Office of Family Assistance Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Grant to enhance father involvement. Our goals in implementing this grant were to:

- > Increase father's participation by scheduling PAT personal visits and group connections at times convenient for fathers.
- > Increase fathers' knowledge of child development and the importance of positive involvement in the lives of their children.
- > Provide group connections that are targeted for fathers' needs and include skill-based parenting education using a fathering curriculum (*24/7 Dad* or *Young Dads, Young Moms*).



We learned many lessons as partner sites provided group meetings in urban, rural, and military communities that spanned a range of demographics. Our PAT sites experienced a wide array of successes and challenges, sometimes unique to their community. These experiences provide the foundation for this summary of lessons learned, which is organized by category for ease of reading.

Organizational capacity and oversight

- > Provide training and resources for staff members to ensure they are informed on the importance of father involvement and have strategies for partnering with fathers.
- > Review current services – through the use of surveys, conversations, and other data-gathering tools – to determine if the needs of fathers are being met.
- > Identify internal and external barriers to father participation and develop strategies to mitigate or reduce barriers.
- > Plan yearly offerings for fathers: Identify start-up dates, times, and locations for groups; offer kick-off events to generate interest; develop a marketing and recruitment plan; and delegate staff responsibilities.
- > Develop an action plan (to be reviewed quarterly) that identifies specific goals, strategies to accomplish them, timelines, staff responsibilities, evaluation data, and so on.
- > Identify a father leadership committee to involve interested fathers in decisions for future services.
- > Develop a survey to elicit fathers' initial and ongoing input, including needs that may arise.
- > Include a male advocate to assist with recruiting fathers and facilitating or co-facilitating groups.
- > Develop a budget that includes meals, an important incentive for fathers, especially when they come to meetings directly from work.





Recruitment

- > Build relationships on **every** level – with the fathers, with their spouses/partners, with their children, with staff, with stakeholders, and with community agencies that provide similar as well as support services.
- > Identify recruitment strategies and considerations specific to your service population.
- > Provide specific recruitment events to promote your fatherhood groups (for example, see [Group Connection: The Personal Power of Masculine Readers](#)) or recruit at community events such as health fairs or books fairs.
- > Select a name for your fatherhood group (such as Dads in the Mix or Dads on Duty) with input from fathers. A name is essential for recognition in the community and for marketing, and it can also build buy-in and ownership among group members.
- > Select a meeting location that will be convenient and welcoming for the participants.
- > Design and distribute “father-friendly” flyers with details of the father group connections, including: name of the group, date and time of the meetings, frequency of meetings, location, incentives, agenda, and contact information for questions. Make it visually appealing with artwork featuring fathers and children (see [Dads in the Mix Program Description Flier](#) and [Dads on Duty Program Description Flier](#)).
- > Market to fathers about how their child will benefit from father involvement. This reduces the perception that fathers in the group need to be “fixed” because something is wrong with them.
- > Consider the recruitment techniques that will be most effective in your community. In rural communities it may work to stop and talk to parents of young children; in urban settings this recruitment strategy was not effective.
- > Weigh the potential for success of newsletters, newspaper advertisements or radio spots, e-blasts, and other means of communication.
- > Reduce gatekeeping by including mothers/partners in the recruitment process and, if it’s culturally relevant, offering a class or activity for them simultaneously when the father group is offered.

What Fathers Are Saying There’s so many people that really make an effort out of their own lives to help others that are less fortunate in parenting skills. So thank you for the support and everything you guys have done for the program.

– I. R., *Dads in the Mix*, Allegheny Intermediate Unit



Retention

- > Contact fathers between meetings by sending postcards, and call or text the night before as a reminder of the meeting and topic, to ask if they need transportation, and so on.
- > Stop by their homes to remind them about the next meeting, drop off an agenda, and ask for their input.
- > Take time to build meaningful relationships so fathers know they are important.
- > Provide participation incentives based on the fathers' lifestyles and needs. These could include gift cards for gas, oil changes, retail stores, and restaurants.
- > Provide resources that are relevant to the needs of fathers.
- > Follow through on what you say you will do, whether it is to provide resources, line up transportation, include a requested meeting topic, or attend a court hearing.
- > Involve fathers in making decisions such as developing group rules, creating a committee to plan special events, and so on.

Fatherhood group connections

- > Select a father-focused curriculum to provide purpose and structure. Make sure it includes topics of interest and relevance to your participants.
- > Consider meeting time, day, frequency, and length of group cycle based on the population served. When starting a new group, it is important to meet the needs of a core group of interested dads.
- > Research community events, local sports calendars, and culturally relevant dates when deciding on day/days of the week for group connections.
- > Be consistent about the meeting dates. This is very important in the establishment of initial core groups.
- > Select the location of group meetings carefully, taking into consideration the culture served and how they will view the location, as well as transportation needs.
- > Explain the purpose and format at the start of each meeting. Distribute a written agenda or write the agenda on a chart or white board.
- > Ensure that facilitators follow the agenda, but show flexibility to meet current needs. This is an important way to show you respect fathers' time.
- > Plan for a co-facilitator to assist with responsibilities such as recruitment, greeting fathers when they arrive, completing paperwork, assisting during the meeting, and so on.

Many successes and challenges were experienced during the past five years of this project. To meet challenges in recruiting and retaining fathers, services became more effective and increasingly individualized for each group. Successful strategies were retained and new adaptations were made. Each successive group of fathers brought new challenges as well as a certain comfort level based on past successes.



The benefits of these lessons learned extend beyond the partner sites implementing these groups and their communities. Evaluations and testimonials have highlighted specific ways fathers, children, and mothers benefit when fathers understand their [important role](#) and are involved in positive ways in their children's lives. This is a legacy that lasts far beyond a five-year grant.

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Last updated: November 30, 2011