



Spring 2000

Published by

OPEN, INC.

Offender Preparation &
Education Network, Inc.

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INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Fatherhood Programs: Serving Dads Where We Find Them

By Preston J. Garrison, Executive Director
National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Inc.

We have heard and read the statistics so often they sometimes no longer impress us. Yet as we are all too aware, the statistics are shocking: *a quarter of the nation's kids live below the poverty level. Over 1.5 million of them have a parent in prison. Almost half a million teenagers give birth each year. Fewer than 75% of all teens graduate from high school; among African-Americans and Hispanics the graduation rate is 58% and 52%, respectively. On any given day, over 100,000 of the country's children are homeless.*

Increased divorce rates, out-of-wedlock births, and the breakdown of many traditional family supports have led to the reduced participation of many fathers in the lives of their children. Public policy decisions, many of which have had numerous negative, unintended consequences (*including that of distancing fathers from their children*), coupled with a changing economy, have exacerbated this trend. And social programs designed to help children have traditionally been focused on the maternal parent — often excluding the father. But studies and common sense leave no doubt that children experience heightened well-being from the positive, active involvement of both mother and father in their lives.

Growing awareness among professionals, policymakers, funders and others working on behalf of children regarding the importance of involving fathers in their children's lives has led to an emerging "*fatherhood field*." Programs are developing throughout the nation to support men — particularly young, poor, unmarried men — in their efforts to be positively involved with their children and to become more productive members of society. Many of these fatherhood and other male-involvement initiatives are being developed as projects of organizations that are already serving mothers and children; some are extensions of community development efforts; others developed as stand-alone programs. Their efforts, while directed at fathers,

have much larger target audiences: first and foremost the children; then come the families, communities, and society in general.

Fatherhood and male involvement programs differ from community to community as they seek to meet the diverse needs of the men with whom they work. Most, however, share certain components including working with men to develop their parenting and co-parenting skills, job readiness and employability skills, relationship skills and spirituality. For example, the *Father to Father Initiative* in North Charleston, South Carolina features personal development and parenting skills, while in the neighboring city of Florence, the *Fatherhood Engagement Program* puts a premium on hands-on job training. Other programs provide support services, assistance with legal issues, and coordination of community resources.

The individuals who run fatherhood programs come from a variety of backgrounds: social work,

(continued on page 2)

OPEN is striving to collect insights from ex-offenders who are currently serving as treatment providers in adult corrections.

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child services, juvenile justice, community development, early childhood education, mental health, and social activism to name only a few. They bring with them enthusiasm, passion, caring and in many cases the personal experience of growing up without a father in their lives. Their training is diverse and sometimes only peripherally related to the challenges they face in this emerging field.

Serving Fathers Behind Bars and on the Street

Programs that are set up to serve fathers, and the practitioners who work in them, go "where the dads are." That means for community-based programs in the inner cities, showing up at the Midnight Basketball League, at the pool hall, or "on the corner." Joe Jones, President of the Baltimore, Maryland *Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development*, characterizes many of the clients served by fatherhood programs as "a subculture of hundreds of thousands of unemployed and underemployed young men who have no valid state ID's, no vital records, no Social Security cards, no birth certificates — they are unrecognized and uncounted." For programs that offer services to fathers who are incarcerated, it means going inside the county jail, the juvenile detention center, or the state prison.

Some community-based programs serve fathers who do not have the financial ability to pay child support for their non-custodial children and provide an alternative to jail for these "dead broke dads." The *Gulf Coast Jewish Family Service's Fatherhood Programs* help men who are sent to them by court order attain the social and job skills necessary to support their children, while *The Georgia Fatherhood Program*, which is housed in the state's Child Support Enforcement Agency, contracts with the state's technical schools to provide trades training for court-ordered non-custodial fathers.

Fatherhood programs that offer supports and services to incarcerated fathers also cross a gamut of approaches. Many are operated as not-for-profit organizations; others are governmentally administered. Many, such as Atlanta's *Fathers' Resource Center's "Fatherhood Responsibility"* program component, have a strong faith-based perspective. The *MELD for Young Dads* program in Hennepin County Home School works with 15 to 18 year old fathers to increase their awareness of the choices they have in parenting. The *Osborne Association's Children's Center and Family Works Program* takes a multi-dimensional approach to serving families and fathers at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. *Fatherhood Training for Prisoners*, a pilot project of the North Carolina Department of Corrections, is a state effort to develop and implement a fatherhood training curriculum for North Carolina Division of Prisons inmates.

No matter what their approach or where they are located, fatherhood and male involvement program practitioners have much to contribute to the fatherhood field beyond their obvious and crucial role in providing direct services to their clients. Their ex-

pertise and understanding of the issues involved in developing and implementing programs, along with the lessons they have learned through often painful trial and error and their unique front-lines perspective, comprise valuable experience that should be shared with researchers, policymakers, the media, and a concerned public — as well as with the fathers, mothers and children they seek to assist.

And what can be more important work? Fathers are important to children! Fathers are a vital source of caring and nurturing, as well as of financial support. Fathers provide child care and role models; they set expectations and they help children navigate sometimes complex relationships. Father involvement is important not only to children and their mothers, but to the men themselves. Increasing the life chances and choices of children by bringing fathers and father-figures back into their lives and their families is indeed worthy of the energy that goes into creating and sustaining programs, recruiting and retaining members and building acceptance in the community and among traditional social and human service providers.

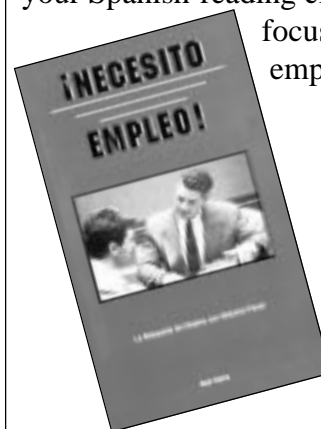
It's tough work. But, hey, somebody's got to do it!

The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Inc. (NPNFF) is the national individual membership organization whose mission is to build the profession of practitioners working to increase the responsible involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. To contact NPNFF, call (800) 34N-PNFF, or e-mail info@npnff.org

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On September 13 - 15, 2000, the *North American Conference on Fathers Behind Bars and on the Street* will be held at the Regal University Hotel in Durham, North Carolina. It is the first of its kind to present an in-depth exploration of the practice, research and policy issues impacting both fathers who live in the community and fathers who are incarcerated in local, state, and federal correctional institutions.

The conference will bring together individuals and organizations dedicated to serving the needs of fathers and their families; addressing the major social, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to the growing number of children who grow up in single-parent homes and fragile families.

Three tracks of workshops, panel discussions, and seminars are planned:

- **Community** track, with a focus on the delivery of services to fathers and their families through community-based responsible fatherhood programs.
- **Corrections** track, focusing on the provision of services and programs to fathers who are incarcerated and their families.
- **Theory and Policy** track, exploring issues that have an impact on fathers and families in today's society.

All workshops, panel discussions, and seminars will focus on the areas of practice, research, and policy intended to advance understanding and knowledge within the fatherhood sector. For further information contact **Preston Garrison** at (202) 737-6680, Ext. 203.



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