

Involving Fathers

The beginning of the preschool program year is full of opportunities—opportunities to introduce new materials, read the latest award-winning storybooks, or rearrange the classroom to make room for new interest areas. It's also a time when teachers welcome families to the program.

Research shows that more and more men are taking active roles in their children's lives. Preschool programs need to recognize this trend by making sure both fathers and mothers feel welcome. Use the following strategies to encourage fathers to take part in their children's preschool learning. Please note that these strategies are appropriate for involving **all** kinds of families.

Communicate with fathers. Learn both parents' names and then remember them. A simple, "Good morning, Dan," can go a long way in welcoming a father to your classroom. Direct all communication—phone calls, e-mails, letters home—to both parents. Take a look at your program's forms. Do they include a place for both parents to sign? Invite mothers and fathers to participate in meetings, conferences, and special events. If there are fathers who rarely or never visit the program, seek them out. Let them know you would like to meet them because they are so vital in their children's lives.

Make men visible. Hire male staff and recruit male volunteers. Include books about men and fathers in your classroom library—especially books featuring male characters in nurturing roles. Display photos of the children's families in the classroom, making sure fathers are pictured. Throughout the building, hang posters or photos of children interacting with both men and women. Make sure the images of men capture nurturing or caring moments. It is important for children to see men and women acting in a variety of roles.

Encourage fathers to be involved. Think about how fathers can participate in your program. Do you need chaperones for field trips? Members for the center's advisory board? Volunteers to frame artwork or plan a family picnic? Adults to demonstrate their hobbies for the children? Keep fathers updated about what is going on in your program, and invite them to contribute.

Kick off the year with a father-child event. At the beginning of the program year, hold a special father-child event. You might host a dinner and games night or plan a breakfast before the workday begins. This will show fathers—and father figures such as a family friend, grandfather, or big brother—that they are impor-

tant to the program and an essential part of their children's lives. Seek volunteers to help plan the event, or ask the fathers of children who were in the class the year before to serve as planners and mentors to the new dads. During this event, tell fathers about other ways they can help, such as repairing broken toys or helping to build a bookshelf.

Hold other special events during the year. Throughout the year, plan other special family events with fathers in mind. On a Saturday or Sunday, host a Big Truck Day. Invite construction companies, ambulance drivers, fire fighters, police officers, and farmers to bring in their big trucks and machines. Remember that you will need a large parking lot to accommodate these vehicles. Fathers can check out the trucks with their children and talk to them about careers, safety, and community. You might also have an Inventor's Day. Collect items such as old or broken radios, clocks, small appliances, and machines. Provide tools and give father-child teams time to take apart the machines and talk about the parts and then recreate a new, invented machine together. Be sure to have a knowledgeable adult on site to supervise the activity for safety. A Family Reading Night can also bring families together. Pajama-clad children and adults can bring their books, blankets, and pillows from home. The program can provide more books, healthy snacks, and handouts with tips for reading aloud with children. Invite guest readers from the community.

Start a parent-teacher reading group. Scheduling a monthly reading group is a great way to invite families to be more involved in the program and to create a community of learners. Ask for volunteers—both mothers and fathers—to serve as the reading group planners. Then share the plans and schedule with all of the parents and ask them to suggest topics of interest. As an alternative, you might make a list of suggested topics or books and ask parents to choose their top five. The planning group can select a topic for the first meeting, make copies of a relevant article or resource, pose a few questions to get the discussion started, and bring refreshments to the first session. (After the first session, parent participants can take turns providing refreshments for the group.) During the meeting, offer child care and snacks. Invite one of the volunteers to ask a question to get the discussion going, then allow the parents to take over. Follow up with a newsletter to share the highlights of the group's meeting with the entire parent community. Have extra copies on hand for parents who are interested, but can't attend the meeting.

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For more information and ideas, check out these resources:

Online Resources

A Call to Commitment: Fathers' Involvement in Children's Learning is a free publication from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It provides strategies for improving father involvement and gives examples of what programs across the country are doing to include fathers in children's learning. www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/calltocommit/fathers.pdf

The Engaging Fathers Program Web site from the University of Newcastle in Australia lists free resources and articles, including a checklist for including fathers and father figures in school. www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/efp/index.html

Father Involvement—Building Strong Programs for Strong Families, a free bulletin from the Head Start Information and Publication Center, offers links to a variety of articles and resources about involving fathers. www.headstart.info.org/publications/hsbulletin77/cont_77.htm

Father Involvement in Early Childhood Programs: A Key Topic Resource List includes the most relevant reports, papers, summaries, studies, and reviews on the topic of father involvement in early childhood programs from 1999 to July 2008. From Research Connections. <http://researchconnections.org/discover/keytopics/FatherInvolvement.pdf>

The Fathers Network provides resources and information to help fathers and families who are raising children with developmental disabilities and special health care needs. www.fathersnetwork.org

MenTeach is a nonprofit clearinghouse that provides information about men in the teaching profession. The site offers news, resources, message boards, personal stories, and more. www.menteach.org

National Center for Fathering works to inspire and equip men to be more involved in their children's lives. The Web site contains articles and information for fathers, including research, columns, podcasts, a weekly newsletter, and more. <http://fathers.com>

Books

Balaban, N. 2006. *Everyday goodbyes: Starting school and early care—A guide to the separation process*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Jervis, K., & B.K. Polland. 2007. *Separation: Supporting children in their preschool transitions*. Rev. ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Koralek, D.G., ed. 2007. *Spotlight on young children and families*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Articles

Gadzikowski, A. 2003. It's the little things that count: How we welcome families to our full-day preschool program. *Young Children* 58 (4): 94–95.

Koralek, D., ed. 2002. Men in the lives of children. Special issue. *Young Children* 57 (6).

Turbiville, V.P., G.T. Umbarger, & A.C. Guthrie. 2000. Fathers' involvement in programs for young children. *Young Children* 55 (4): 74–79.

Selected articles appear online in Beyond the Journal at: <http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200601>