

Taking Steps to Help Families



Marsha L. Rump

EARLY CHILDHOOD professionals serving children with special needs can have an increased positive impact on the lives of children and families with whom they are involved by adopting some of the following suggestions. The ideas, gleaned from publications of The Fathers Network (May 1997) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1999) as well as those gained from personal experience, offer approaches to strengthening communication with families.

Policies in practice

- Include information about the importance of men in children's lives in mission statements, family handbooks, and family communications.
- Involve the father during family/child program intake. If the father is not present, inquire about him or other significant male figures in the child's life, and stress their important roles in the family.
- Arrange a time when both parents can participate when scheduling an IEP (Individual Education Plan) or IFSP (Individual Family Service Plan) meeting, teacher-parent conference, home visit, or family meeting.
- Talk with the father as well as the mother when telephoning a family at home.
- Review policies on how noncustodial parents can participate in program activities.
- Ensure that program print materials communicate to men as well as women by monitoring the choices of paper color, graphics, topics, and language.

- Learn the names of the father and other significant men in each child's life and take the time to talk with them individually.

Education that broadens thinking

- Conduct staff inservice programs about improving the quality of service delivery to fathers/males, with some of the training being provided by fathers themselves.
- Survey men whose children are in the program to find out their interests and concerns.
- Establish locally available father support groups.
- Make available a quality library of print, audio, and video resources.
- Display pictures and read books to children that portray men and children in a variety of settings.

Organization to make involvement work

- Get fathers to serve on the agency/organization board and standing committees.
- Involve fathers in physical, occupational, and speech therapy and in the classroom. For example,

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(1) offer an evening therapy and classroom time; (2) ask fathers to volunteer in the classroom; (3) teach fathers how to work with their child at home through play and other naturally occurring activities—swimming, on the playground, bath time, mealtime, and so on; or (4) videotape classroom activities and therapy so the father can follow his child’s progress.

- Recruit and employ male staff.
- Encourage male participation by planning special “Dad and Me” or “Me and My Guy” events.

References

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NAEYC. 1999. *Involving men in the lives of young children*. Brochure. Washington, DC: Author.

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