



**national
healthy marriage
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NHMRC June 2008 Webinar Frequently Asked Questions

Fatherhood and Marriage: What's the Connection?

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The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center broadcasted a webinar entitled "Fatherhood and Marriage: What's the Connection?" on June 25, 2008. During the course of the webinar, we received more questions than we were able to answer. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is a follow-up to many of the questions posted during the webinar.

1. What does responsible fatherhood mean and what is the responsible fatherhood movement?

Responsible fatherhood refers to the belief that men are also responsible for creating and nurturing children. During the second half of the 20th century, increased attention was paid to teenage and single mothers. Financial supports, education and blame were all aimed at unmarried or divorced mothers. We slowly began to realize that fathers were part of the equation as well. Men should be responsible for their children whether or not they are still involved with their children's mothers. At the same time, some men's groups were forming in reaction to mother-centered policies. They became frustrated that women were more likely to receive custody following divorces and felt that men were becoming marginalized in their children's lives. These two related movements spurred the development of responsible fatherhood programs.

Responsible fatherhood programs are aimed, primarily, at low-income non-residential fathers. These programs teach men the importance of being and staying involved in their children's lives. While responsible fatherhood programs strongly encourage men to financially support their families, they teach

that spending time with children is just as important. In addition, most programs work with fathers to develop amicable co-parenting relationships with their children's mothers.

2. What is the connection between the responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage initiatives?

Healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs both have the same ultimate goal: to increase child wellbeing. Healthy marriage programs seek to increase child wellbeing by improving the quality of the parents' marriage. Most programs assume that the fathers are already involved in their children's lives since they usually live with the rest of their family. Responsible fatherhood programs usually target non-residential fathers. These programs focus on teaching parenting skills and the importance of fathers. They also usually talk about the importance of good co-parenting relationships.

Both programs can learn from the classroom lessons provided by the other. Healthy marriage programs could address more parenting issues as a way to both improve couple relations and child wellbeing. Innovative fatherhood programs could work to include the mothers during parts of the program. Getting the father and his child's mother in the same room allows the program to teach communication and conflict resolution skills to both parents.

3. How do fathers influence child development?

Fathers affect child development in many ways. The most traditional is as a provider. The income that

men give to their children, either as a residential parent or as child support, helps to cover basic needs like shelter, food, clothing, transportation and schooling expenses. Men are much more than walking wallets, though. Fathers who are supportive, caring, consistently engaged and whose parenting is appropriate for their child's stage of development can make a big difference in their kids' lives. More than just another parent, some research has shown that the ways men interact with their children differ from mothers and that fathers uniquely contribute to a child's development. For example, fathers are more likely to play rough with their children, allowing them to take more risks than do mothers, which leads to a sense of strength and accomplishment in children. Additionally, men often talk to their children differently, spurring different kinds of language development.

4. What factors impede father involvement? How can Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage programs help fathers overcome these barriers?

Fathers are more likely to be involved in their children's lives if they live with them. Additionally, men tend to be more involved in their kids' lives if they are romantically involved with the children's mother, but fathers are less likely to be involved if the mothers live with their extended family or new partners. Men who have jobs are more likely to spend time with their children. Finally, the earlier a man becomes involved in his child's life, the more likely he is to stay that way. It is more difficult for a disengaged man to insert himself into his child's life than it is for an involved father to continue to stay involved.

Programs should focus on fathers' abilities to interact with their children's mothers. Mothers are the "gatekeepers" to children, and positive co-parenting

relationships are the best way to ensure that fathers and children stay connected. Programs also need to recognize that fathers may have children by more than one mother. Thus, even married dads in a healthy marriage program may be non-resident parents to other children. It is often difficult to juggle the demands, schedules and needs of multiple co-parents and programs should help fathers manage their co-parent relationships. Programs should also work with fathers to ensure that they understand that fathering is more than financial support. Men content with writing a check each month should be encouraged to engage with their children more, while unemployed fathers should be encouraged not to cut off contact just because they cannot provide financial support. Finally, programs should target fathers as early as possible. Men who are engaged from pregnancy or birth build connections with their children early on and it's easier to continue a relationship than to start one with an older child.

5. What are some practical activities and exercises programs can use with fathers to increase their supportive involvement in their children's lives?

Fathers need to know how important they are to their children. Many low-income men did not have relationships with their own fathers. Helping them to remember how it was to grow up without a dad, including how difficult it was for their mothers to be single parents, can show fathers what their absence would be like. Additionally, while many men understand how hurtful it is to not grow up with a father, they may not be able to envision what fathers actually do. Activities that demonstrate authoritative parenting and mentoring can help with that information need. The program can also invite fathers to bring their children to the center for a game or sports afternoon.

6. The presenters discussed the need for personal development in Responsible Fatherhood programs. What kinds of personal development do fathers need?

Many low-income and young fathers have not completed high school. Connecting these men with GED training and testing will help prepare them to get a job. Fathers may also need help developing their “soft skills,” like how to dress for an interview, how to make small talk, the importance of getting to work on time, and how to be a “team player.” Some men could benefit from support group discussions of how they interacted with their fathers and how they’d like to interact with their children. Finally, some fathers may have low self-esteem and confidence that prevent them from getting more involved in their children’s lives. Programs should help these fathers develop into men who feel worthy of being parents.

7. How should responsible fatherhood programs address domestic violence?

Programs should develop a protocol for addressing domestic violence issues in partnership with a local domestic violence organization. The protocol needs to address disclosures of both domestic violence perpetration and victimization (men can also be victims of domestic violence). Programs should educate their fathers on what domestic violence is, how it affects all family members and how to engage in less hurtful ways of interaction. Additionally, your program should be able to refer men to a batterers’ intervention program. Many of these programs are court-ordered; you’ll have to see if your clients are able to join them voluntarily.

8. What are some ways we can encourage long-distance father involvement for incarcerated men?

Incarcerated fathers can, if they parent positively, be important factors in their children’s lives despite their prison sentence. Men should write letters to their children. Programs can help fathers send cards for children’s birthdays and important holidays. Programs can also audio-record fathers reading books to their children and send the burned CD and book to the children. Additionally, you could videotape fathers talking to their children and provide the children a location to watch the tapes or DVDs if they don’t have a player. Fathers should also ask the children’s mothers to keep them informed about developments in their children’s lives. Important developments include teeth lost, new friends or pets, school grades and achievements, sports activities, favorite books and any recent disappointments. By staying informed about the child’s day-to-day experience, the father can better understand his child’s life even if he’s not there to see each day unfold.