

***Focus on Prevention: Collaboration between
Fatherhood and Domestic Violence Programs in Communities Color –
Opening Conference Statement***

Center for Family Policy and Practice Conference – October 2005

This institute is the result of many years of our organization talking and working with other interested organizations to promote government and community-based efforts to encourage collaborative work between advocates for battered women and for low-income fathers.

Since 1995 CFFPP has been reaching out to women's organizations and to advocates for battered women. The intent was to openly discuss the potential impact of increased father involvement on women and children in general, and on battered women in particular. CFFPP entered this discussion, not with the intention of furthering the fathers rights agenda nor of encouraging marriage or family formation, but to provide education and information about the need for social services (such as those provided by fatherhood organizations) for men; and to provide the bridge between fatherhood groups and women's advocates.

What is encouraging to us, and may be surprising to some, is that in the years since we began this work, we have developed relationships with both anti-violence advocates and fatherhood practitioners who understand the need for this kind of collaboration, and have always been eager for discussion and for the opportunity to brainstorm programs and solutions.

The collaboration has progress slowly but surely. So far, there are three ways we have been able to work together towards the objectives of creating social services for father involvement and ensuring the safety of women and children:

- 1) discussion groups and forums that allow advocates for low-income men and women to provide each other basic information and explanation about each other's work;
- 2) working groups and conferences in which battered women's advocates and fatherhood program practitioners brainstorm ideas and program structure that would facilitate safe family interaction; and
- 3) co-authorship of papers, collaborative presentations, and consultation and collaboration on projects and proposals.

Before I say more about this type of collaboration, and the way it has played itself out in within and among organizations like ours, I would like to be clear about our perception of the role of fatherhood programs in low-income communities, and particularly low-income communities of color.

The Fatherhood “Movement”

Traditionally there is one type of organization for fathers who are *not* low-income parents. This type—so-called “father’s rights” organizations—until very recently, been the most visible and vocal type of fatherhood organization. Those types of organizations, so particularly and specifically focused on men’s rights as fathers, have traditionally been comprised of white, more likely middle and working class men who have, traditionally, been come together to discuss and

develop strategy for using the family courts and lawyers to gain visitation rights, reduce child support payments, and dispute sexual and physical abuse charges. We are not talking about that.

Over the years, there have, also, been other kinds of fatherhood projects on national, state and local levels. There have been government directives to agencies to maximize father involvement in all federal government policy and practice, and national declarations and celebrations on Father's Day. Also, the National Fatherhood Initiative received funding to do advertising campaigns around the country promoting fatherhood, father involvement, and from their perspective, the importance of biological fathers in children's lives. At the state level and at the federal level, in both the previous and current presidential administrations, and in a bi-partisan legislative effort, government has, in the context of father involvement, supported marriage promotion efforts, fatherhood initiatives and child support reforms. We are not talking about that either.

Though there have, perhaps, been some promising outcomes, so far, government proposals and fatherhood initiatives have gotten the job done. They have, in some cases, not addressed, and, in other cases, not proven to be successful in addressing, the most intractable barriers to father involvement. Some of those barriers are based on poor men's lack of economic viability and include lack of education and training, lack of employment and employment opportunities, race and class discrimination, criminal records, and lack of identifying and validating credentials (driver's license, permanent address, and previous work history). Others are barriers created by sociological and psychological factors in the men's lives such as drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness. The goals and objectives of low-income fatherhood programs are to directly

address—for each individual man—these barriers and concerns of poor, employed men and their children.

There are two essential services fatherhood programs must be able to offer low-income men. One is peer and mentoring support for men (particularly men of color) facing the issues of discrimination, lack of education and training, unemployment, and intractable poverty. The other essential service is preparedness for—and referral to—employment. Fatherhood programs were originally designed to provide these services. They started helping low-income fathers by providing neighborhood mentors, and peer support, and assisting in the men's attempt to find work and to access education and training. The peer support provides opportunity for discussion around the issues of involvement with children, interaction with the children's mother, and concerns about providing for themselves and their children while dealing with poverty and racial discrimination.

Historically, fatherhood programs developed in communities of color (usually Latino or African-American) in community-based organizations that were already serving women and children. In many cases especially in the early stages of the development of these fatherhood programs, relatively more stable men in the neighborhood and in the community-based organizations realized the necessity of reaching out to poor men who were struggling with potentially destructive problems. These men were the early social service providers and on-the-ground practitioners. This is the type of fatherhood programs we are talking about.

So, we have nothing to say about father's rights organizations, but as to government fatherhood initiatives and policy, analysts suggest that proposed fatherhood initiatives within current welfare

reauthorization legislation is, likely to pass both houses, and, so far, most of that legislation includes a requirement that grantee fatherhood programs promote and encourage marriage. That promotion and encouragement is clearly spelled out; couples counseling, anti-divorce workshops, engaged couples counseling, how to manage money in a married household, etc.

Thus there may be some confusion around goals and agenda of on-the-ground fatherhood programs and those to which government policy is directed. From what we can tell through focus groups with mothers, fathers and fatherhood practitioners, people in the community would like to see social services for low-income, unemployed men and women, underemployed, and previously incarcerated men and women, that would help them to support their children and themselves.

Federal and State government policy, on the other hand, are directed toward the articulated goals of marriage, and payment through the formal child support system. The difference in these goals does not necessarily make these objectives mutually exclusive, but they are different, and that difference must be illuminated and reconciled.

Currently, state and federal governments are funding already existing programs and creating new fatherhood programs. It is important for advocates of low-income families, and fatherhood practitioners to develop and examine their program goals and objectives and satisfy themselves that the government funding requirements and processes are compatible with their programs goals and objectives to serve the real needs of low-income families.

What about fatherhood programs encouraging “father involvement.”

The great majority of men in *low-income fatherhood programs* want to be able to provide for their children, above and beyond the child’s financial needs. They also want to be involved in the child’s upbringing. Many men who participate in fatherhood programs do so voluntarily, and—honestly—the possibility of being an involved Dad *is* one of the reasons they voluntarily participate in the programs.

Certainly, fatherhood programs should not encourage men return to their families, and encourage them to take the “responsibility” to control and direct individual family members, or to be the master of their family and household. But one of the central aspects of most low-income fatherhood programs is parenting skills, a how-to on being a good, involved father.

So, what are the dangers of promoting father involvement in low-income families? That is a very important, and in some ways urgent question. A fatherhood program, at any point in time, may be serving a current batterer, a future batterer, and someone who’ll never batter. There may be no way to recognize these individuals given that, in most cases, the practitioner does not have information from the child’s mother. Encouraging and supporting father involvement must be based in an acknowledgment of these possibilities. However, fatherhood programs are not the same as batterer’s intervention programs. They have different rules, different goals, different structure, different objectives, different staff expertise—completely different premises. Some fatherhood practitioners have said that they are not sure how to approach the issue of domestic violence. Some worry about alienating the men, and about putting women at more risk.

And so.....back to Collaboration

Fatherhood programs, just like all other social service programs must be administered within the context of the reality of the existence of domestic and community violence in our society, and in the lives of low-income families. Service providers in fatherhood programs need to talk with, teach, organize with, and learn from people who understand the dynamics of domestic violence.

Challenges

One of the challenges to the success of these types of collaborations is the perception that each group tends to have of the other. Many battered women's advocates' perception of "fatherhood groups" is negatively associated with father's rights groups or government "responsible fatherhood" programs, organized primarily around the promotion of marriage.

Another challenge has been that this growing discussion about the need for safety around father involvement programs has been interpreted by some fatherhood practitioners and others as an implication from domestic violence advocates that all men are violent, or—more specifically—that all poor men of color are violent.

Finally, there are the practical issues, and, perhaps, the most important issues, such as the question of how fatherhood programs can (or should) respond to—or anticipate—domestic violence. Should that response include intervention, or prevention, or both? Also, in what ways should fatherhood programs be like or unlike batterer's intervention programs?

Lessons learned

Our work at CFFPP has been to talk with battered women's advocates about the need for men to be able to access vital social services. We have also worked to facilitate discussions about domestic violence within individual fatherhood programs and among various practitioners.

Though we are all still faced with all the challenges, we have been able to identify important information and insights necessary to structure the future collaborative programs and proposals. In our experience, advocates of these two important fields have been willing and able to work together toward a common goal of supporting safe parenting and encouraging the creation of healthy, safe, nurturing and secure communities and family environments for children and parents.

Some lessons have been learned:

- It is incumbent upon father involvement programs to incorporate responses to general and specific occurrences of domestic violence perpetrated by men against women. However, one of the next steps is to work collaboratively to figure out exactly what the nature of that response should be.
- Fatherhood programs, legislation, or policy initiatives benefit from the input of mothers and other women. Their perspective on cooperative parenting issues is essential to the success of programs designed to re-involve fathers.
- The collaboration between these two groups is not necessarily for each to be directly involved in the work of the other. So that battered women's advocates should not be called to encourage father involvement in individual situations, and fatherhood programs practitioner should not be called to do the counseling and restorative work of batterer's intervention in any particular situation. Rather what is most important to the success of the collaborative work is that each group become informed on the work of the other, and become a voice of support for that work.
- Father involvement programs or philosophies which encourage men to take control over their children and the children's mother will not be well received by many women or by women's advocacy organizations, and will likely make collaboration impossible.
- Battered women's advocates should not ignore or dismiss the cultural or personal significance to a woman of the man with whom she has had a child. This significance may not be diminished even in instances where a woman decides that it is best for her and her child that they discontinue any further contact him.

- Many fatherhood practitioners are eager to understand the issues involved in domestic violence are interested in providing services that help promote the safety and well-being of women and children
- Many low-income mothers and women's advocates understand that poor fathers need the same social welfare services that mothers need (e.g., employment and training, housing assistance, emergency cash assistance
- Many poor women would prefer that their children's father be allowed to get social services so that he will be able to help support their children.

We believe that this work is urgently needed, and we are confident that there are many people like you prepared to do it.