It’s Father’s day

Most child-abuse-prevention programs have focused on mothers, but a new crop of psychologist-designed efforts now target Dad.

BY REBECCA A. CLAY

When it comes to engaging fathers in programs to prevent child maltreatment, says Anil Chacko, PhD, sometimes it’s better to be a little indirect. That’s because fathers are often reluctant to admit they have a problem, says Chacko, an assistant psychology professor at Queens College in New York.

“When a program says, ‘Come join us, and you’ll be a better parent,’ fathers aren’t likely to sign up,” he explains. “But if you get them to focus on their kids, you’re more likely to get fathers in because they don’t see it as an affront to their self-concept.”

That’s why Chacko describes the intervention he’s developing as a program to enhance preschoolers’ language and literacy skills, even though it’s really their dads he’s after.

Chacko’s father-centered approach is typical of new efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect. Although such programs have traditionally focused on mothers, psychologists across the country are now reaching out to dads as untapped resources. And federal agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Administration for Children and Families, are supporting these innovative initiatives.

Better understanding dads

Fathers are perpetrators in about a third of all child-maltreatment cases, yet most parenting programs focus on moms, says psychologist Beverly L. Fortson, PhD, a behavioral scientist in CDC’s Division of Violence Prevention.

“We have these great parenting programs and lots of good research on them, but much of that research doesn’t include fathers,” she says. “We want to better understand how to focus on fathers.”

Gaining that knowledge is the goal of a new CDC grant program designed to adapt evidence-based parenting programs to better engage fathers.

As one of the two grantees, Chacko and co-investigator Gregory A. Fabiano, PhD, of the University at Buffalo, are combining two proven programs—one that uses videos and group discussions to help parents improve their parenting skills and another that uses shared book reading to develop children’s language and literacy skills—and giving them...
father-friendly twist.
The program, dubbed the Fathers Supporting Success in Preschoolers project, will target high-risk fathers in low-income neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens. Factors such as poverty, hostile relationships with partners and lack of support can combine to put these fathers at higher risk of aggressive parenting behavior, says Chacko.

In the intervention, groups of dads watch brief video clips of fathers and children reading together. Sometimes the fathers in the vignettes make mistakes, such as expressing unrealistic expectations about the child's reading ability or not sticking to established reading routines. Other times, the fathers do things right. They might ignore mildly inappropriate behavior and use distractions to minimize conflict during shared book reading, for example. Or they might walk a child through the logical consequences of his or her actions when the child handles a book too roughly and tears a page.

Participants then discuss the scenarios and broaden the discussion beyond reading. They might explore the effect unrealistic expectations can have on children and how to bring appropriate expectations to all areas of parenting. The sessions, which take place at Head Start programs, end with fathers and children reading together. In addition to improving kids' language and literacy skills, Chacko hypothesizes, the program will improve parenting skills and reduce parental stress.

Other father-engagement programs have already shown results. In the Supporting Father Involvement program — an initiative that began in California and is now spreading beyond the state — the focus is on co-parenting.

Housed in family resource centers that serve low-income families in California's Contra Costa, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, Tulare and Yuba counties, the 16-week program combines discussion groups for couples or fathers, case management, and efforts to make organizations more father-friendly.

"Most child-abuse-reduction programs don't focus on the dads as missing resources in the family," says psychologist Marsha Kline Pruett, PhD, one of the program's designers and a professor in the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Mass. "Having two parents working together and serving as a sort of check and balance on each other's extreme behaviors has turned out to give both parents and kids a safety net."

The evidence suggests that this approach works. In a clinical trial of the Supporting Father Involvement programs published last year in the Journal of Marriage and Family (Vol. 71, No. 3), Pruett and her colleagues randomly assigned 289 couples to a 16-week group for fathers, a 16-week group for couples or a single informational meeting. They found that both interventions improved fathers' engagement with their children, the quality of the couples' relationships and children's problem behaviors. However, participants in the groups for couples showed more consistent, longer-lasting improvements.
Stopping the cycle

While researchers like Chacko and Pruett work to stop child
abuse before it starts, other programs are tackling a knottier
problem: re-engaging fathers whose children are involved
in the child welfare system. The vast majority of children
placed in child welfare are living with their mothers when the 
abuse or neglect occurs, says psychologist Mark S. Kselica, PhD, past
president of APA’s Div. 51 (Society for the Psychological Study
of Men and Masculinity) and vice provost of the College of New
Jersey in Ewing. Yet non-resident fathers are typically overlooked
as a potential source of support for these children.

“There’s often an assumption that these fathers are no good —
that they themselves would be abusive and couldn’t possibly
be a resource for this child and family,” says Kselica, an advisory
board member of the National Quality Improvement Center on
Non-resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System.

The center has launched a five-year study to challenge
that assumption. Funded by the Administration for Children
and Families, the research will determine the impact that
getting fathers involved in their children’s lives has on child
welfare outcomes. Led by public child protection agencies in
Indianapolis, Seattle, Colorado Springs and Fort Worth, four
pilot projects are randomly assigning non-resident fathers to
treatment groups or control groups consisting of 20 weekly peer-led
support groups. When the pilot projects wrap up later this year,
the center will disseminate its findings to
courts and others.

Other programs go beyond practical
parenting skills to address the deep-
slated factors behind child maltreatment.

In Project Fatherhood, a program of
the Children’s Institute in Los Angeles, the
focus is on fathers’ own lives.

By tackling such issues as substance
abuse, failed relationships, and their
own histories of abuse or neglect,
participants build their parenting skills
and connect with their children. The core
component of the Project Fatherhood
model is “men in relationships groups,”
where fathers come together to have
facilitated discussions on self-esteem,
isoation, stress and intergenerational
factors. Like Alcoholics Anonymous,
the process is open-ended and long-
term, with most participants progressing
through the program’s five stages —
intake, rapport and trust, symptom relief,
behavior change, and internalization and
commitment — in about a year.

“He needs to process those things
that happened to him and make sure he
doesn’t repeat them with his own children,” says psychologist
Hershell K. Swinger, PhD, who founded the project in 1996.

The therapy groups also teach fathers about phases in
normal child development, such as sexual exploration with
other children and teenage narcissism, helping men to better
understand their children.

“Another issue we cover is distinguishing between discipline
and abuse — that discipline is to teach and abuse is for the
abuser,” says Swinger.

The program also includes activity groups for children and
vocational support for the fathers.

The program has reached more than 7,000 fathers, says
Swinger, adding that an outcome evaluation is under way.
And thanks to support from the Administration for Children
and Families, the project is now training organizations around Los Angeles County to bring the program to diverse
populations, including Latino, Cambodian, Native American
and incarcerated fathers.

It’s Swinger’s hope that the program will help fathers
become a resource beyond their own families.

“I’d love to have people call upon the fatherhood groups
instead of calling the police,” says Swinger. “I’d like for there to
be one on every corner.”

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