

How to Engage More Men in Parenting Education Programs

By Eliza Lathrop Cook

Male caregivers play key roles in many children's lives, yet, compared to women, significantly fewer men participate in parenting education programs. Unfortunately, we see similar trends in Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) parenting programs across New York State. Specifically, between the years 2009 and 2013, 28% of all participants were male.

Additionally, our analysis shows that eight out of ten measures of parenting attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge improved significantly from the pre- to the post-test for men. This suggests that, across the state, participation in CCE parent education programs may have a positive impact on men. The goal of this Professional Page is to offer suggestions of how parent educators can more effectively involve men in future parenting efforts.

#1: Ask men what works for them

- **Distribute a survey.** Tim Jahn, Human Ecology Specialist from CCE of Suffolk County, recently created and distributed a poll to all different types of parents in Suffolk County. They asked parents what days were best to hold parenting classes, which method of contact they preferred, what topics they would like covered in parenting classes, among many other questions. Interestingly, the results from their particular survey revealed that there was no difference between the mothers' and fathers' responses. This information is valuable for their particular county because from the survey results they have learned that they do not need to tailor advertising differently for men, than for women. However, fathers' responses will likely vary across counties; so if possible, educators could distribute a survey to better learn about the needs of men in their particular county. If fathers' responses differ dramatically from mothers, parent educators could adjust advertising and scheduling strategies to accommodate these differences.
- **Conduct a simple poll at the end of each course.** If resources are not available to construct and distribute a survey, parent educators could conduct a simple poll at the end of each course. Educators can ask participants their preferences about time, location, and length of class. This feedback can then be used when parent educators are deciding on scheduling and location

details for future classes. If possible, educators should identify which responses were male and which were female so that educators will be able to see if men have similar or different feedback, compared to women.

- **Offer pre-registration and ask key questions.** Many counties already offer a pre-registration process for participants attending parenting classes. When parents inquire about a class, educators can ask for an email address and send participants key information before the class even begins. In this email, educators can also include various scheduling and location questions to better understand individual needs. Of course it will not be possible to accommodate everyone's schedule, but by connecting with parents early on, educators will have time to make adjustments prior to the class beginning.

#2: Communicate expectations

- **Discuss benefits of having both parents present.** Many parents are unsure if they need to attend every session of a parenting class. In fact, it is common for parents to feel that only one parent should attend the class and that a parent can fill their partner in on the information later. While this may be a viable last resort, it should not be their initial plan. In fact, some parenting programs are specifically designed to include both parents and are most effective when both parents attend every session. While being sensitive to busy schedules and childcare constraints, parent educators should be direct and specific in the first session (or even before the class begins) about attendance expectations. Be sure to explain why it is important that both parents attend and the benefits that they will experience if they are both present. If possible, offering childcare assistance during the class is an excellent way to increase the likelihood of both parents being able to attend.
- **Discuss a back-up plan if both parents cannot make it.** Of course it is likely that some parents will be unable to attend the class simultaneously. Depending on your curriculum and the specific needs of the parents, parent educators should discuss possible back-up options with participants. For example, depending on your curriculum and goals, it may make more sense to suggest having the same parent attend each class throughout the course, or it may be more beneficial to have parents alternate their attendance. Discussing your recommendations up front will help guide parents decisions and also help educators prepare for who will be attending.

- **Advertise incentives separately for each parent.** If funding allows, incentives are a useful tool to recruit parents to attend parenting classes. For those using incentives, it is common to offer one small incentive per family (such as a \$5 coupon for gas or groceries) however this sends the message that only one family member needs to attend the parenting class. Instead, if funding allows, men may feel more motivation to attend if incentives are offered to each parent who attends.

#3: Review your course: Is it sensitive to fathers?

- **Review your curriculum.** The roles of fatherhood are changing. Most fathers are no longer solely defined as the breadwinner for their family, rather, they are engaged in many facets of parenting. Unfortunately, past societal customs can take longer to adjust to current fathering identities. Likewise, some parenting curriculums may be outdated and are not sensitive to fathers and other male caregivers. Prior to class, review your activities, highlighted research, assignments, and role-play scenarios. Ensure that fathers are represented in role-play scenarios, included in research you may reference, and considered when making after-class assignments.
- **Review your media.** Media used in parenting classes sends a strong message to those attending. Video clips and photos displayed throughout a class should include both male and female examples. It may seem like a small adjustment, but seeing photos and movie clips of other men during a parenting class will likely reinforce that a male caregiver is welcome and encourage participation.
- **Adjust your language, if needed.** Similar to media decisions, language also sends a message of inclusion or exclusion during a parenting class. Parent educators should assess if they are using both male and female pronouns interchangeably in class examples and avoid stereotyping roles (e.g., working dad and stay-at-home mom). Parent educators should make a conscience effort to reference both male and female caregivers throughout their lesson examples, in a variety of parenting roles (e.g., dad cooking and cleaning, mom mowing the lawn).

#4: Consider including an add-on session, just for men

- **Gauge interest.** If you find that even after utilizing some of the strategies previously discussed, men are still not attending parenting classes, one

possibility is to offer an additional class just for men. Parent educators can ask participants if they have a male partner interested in attending a one-time class for men throughout a program. If there is interest, pick a time and location that is convenient for these men and even ask topics these men would like covered.

- **Advertise.** As discussed, a great strategy to recruit men to attend a male-only parenting class is by asking current female participants if they have male partners interested in attending. However, there may be other men interested in attending a male-only parenting education class. If you do decide to offer this class, be sure to advertise this option to the community.
- **Tailor the experience.** The one time session, with other men, on topics they are interested in may be what these men need for a first time experience with parenting education classes. If it goes well, these fathers may be more open to attending full classes in the future. If possible, spend extra time to foster an environment that these men will feel comfortable in and include examples, media, and scenarios specific to their situations.

Parent educators, and all those who work with fathers, should assess whether their programs, resources, and policies encourage male participation and should make any needed adjustments. We also suggest that parent educators consider the suggestions offered in this brief to increase male participation in their own particular parenting programs.

Visit the *Parenting in Context* project at:

<http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/>

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