



Giving Hope: Serving and Supporting Fathers with Mental Health Challenges

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Fathers' Mental Health Impacts on Child Well-Being



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Fathers' Mental Health Impacts on Child Well-Being: Session Takeaways, Part 1

- **When a father is depressed or anxious or has other mental health issues, family health and child development are affected.** How a father engages with the mother-to-be, supports her, and is generally involved with the family impacts the mom's and the fetus's health from conception through the postpartum period and beyond.
- **People who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) often develop mental health and substance use disorders.** ACEs also can significantly impact future violence victimization and perpetration and lifelong overall health and opportunity, according to the CDC. Up to 61 percent of adults have experienced at least one type of ACE before turning 18, and nearly 1 in 6 have experienced four or more ACEs. Women and racial and ethnic minorities are at greater risk of experiencing four or more ACEs.
- **Early identification and treatment for ACEs** give children and families a better chance to build resilience and thrive. Prolonged adverse effects of ACEs affect mental health and the ability to parent authoritatively. This parenting style is nurturing, responsive, and supportive yet sets firm limits and boundaries, which is optimal for promoting children's growth and development.

Fathers' Mental Health Impacts on Child Well-Being: Takeaways, Part 2

- **Rigid gender norms negatively impact families, communities, and society.** Many behavioral health systems employ rigid ideas about fathers and operate with a deficit model – they assume the fathers aren't parenting the way they should. “The notion that an ‘ideal’ family is the norm is counterproductive; policies that promote or serve only ideal families create additional stress for people who are already struggling.”
- **The National Compadres Network (NCN) defines fatherhood through a broader, more inclusive lens.** NCN practitioners presume fathers want to be engaged with their children and respect that parents guide their children differently. Building culturally competent supports means “abandoning rigidity, viewing the strengths of communities, and building these strengths.” At Child Find, goal-setting for families is unique to each family situation and is culturally sensitive and competent.
- **The more layers of complexity added to parenting, such as “parenting apart,” the more challenging parenting becomes.** When dads are “parenting apart” and struggling with a mental health concern, parenting becomes exponentially more difficult. Empathy is critical for developing and maintaining an effective “parenting apart” relationship. Empathy requires emotional intelligence and the ability to be selfless, which is difficult for struggling people. When parents cannot access counseling or mediation, the quality of the “parenting apart” relationship typically suffers and becomes fraught with conflict.

Fathers' Mental Health Impacts on Child Well-Being: Session Takeaways, Part 3

- **Regardless of the family's situation, parents must show mutual respect and focus on the child and their needs.** Children also benefit from having many adults who are good role models in their lives to strengthen the support and love that surrounds them.
- **Constructing networks of support in spaces dads can easily access and where they feel seen and heard helps children and families thrive.** The range of levels of care includes intensive psychiatric care and medication, a psychologist or counselor to support and guide dads in reaching their goals, and circles of support within the community that are therapeutic but not therapy per se.
- **A client retreating into isolation or behaving in ways atypical for him may be a red flag indicator that he's reverting to old behaviors or relapsing.** The practitioner's role is to follow up and stay connected. If the client is spiraling into full-blown relapse, the counselor must take more immediate action to ensure the safety and well-being of the person suffering and those around him. However, it's important not to "hunt" for red flags by being hypersensitive and overreacting.

Fathers' Mental Health Impacts on Child Well-Being: Session Takeaways, Part 4

- **As a rule, men don't practice good preventive measures for their physical or mental health.**
 - Counselors and practitioners should educate men on steps they can take to avoid crises (e.g., routine checkups, connecting with family and others in their community).
 - They should encourage fathers to trust that the people who know and love them may express concern over changes they have observed. Encourage fathers to consider this feedback, reminding them it comes from a place of care and concern, and be sure they are aware of actions they can take in response.
 - In communities that lack access to formal supportive services, they can seek alternative support from community leaders, religious leaders, barbers – anyone the Dad trusts.
- **Interparental conflict and parental depression are highly correlated.**
 - When one person experiences depression, it raises the risk that the other parent will become depressed.
 - Depression leads to an inability to complete basic tasks, problem-solve, and parent effectively, leading to a distressed or irritable mood, strained communication, and parental conflict.
 - “It takes a lot to undo past patterns, so getting help early on for yourself and recognizing the need to change the communication dynamic with your partner is critical.”
 - Our communities and policies need to make services easier to obtain and more available. “We need to consider this as a family outcome important for health.”

Fathers' Mental Health Impacts on Child Well-Being: Session Takeaways, Part 5

- **Research indicates the earliest stages of life (from 0 to five years old) are the most formative.** If a parent experiences mental health challenges during this stage of their child's life, the child will likely have lingering effects. The longer a parent is not effectively treated for mental health problems, the more the child becomes at risk for developing mental and behavioral problems. "Early intervention is essential for supporting family health, and all available treatment options should be explored to get both parents healthy."
- **Effective messaging to parents** should tell them, "You are important in the life of your child, and your well-being affects your child's health and well-being, so let's treat this now. We have supported other fathers successfully, and their children grew up healthy."
- **Obtaining accurate formal DSM-5 mental health diagnoses** is the most expeditious way to find an effective treatment intervention and for practitioners to receive compensation for their services. However, a mental health diagnosis should never be used to label or stigmatize people.

Fathers' Mental Health Impacts on Child Well-Being: Session Takeaways, Part 6

- **The goal is for dad to nurture as many healthy connections as possible.**
 - Connections can be extended family or nonbiological family.
 - When fathers have connections with many others, they no longer must function solely as authority figures or in isolation.
- **Using inclusive, positive language may enlighten people and expand possibilities for new ways of thinking.**
 - Terms that are falling by the wayside because of their negative or false assumptions are “single parent,” “primary parent,” “secondary parent,” “deadbeat,” and “historically excluded.”
- **To support fathers in their parenting journey, local communities can take several steps.**
 - 1) They can provide education and resources on mental health issues.
 - 2) They can build a strong mental health workforce that supports parents and connects them to necessary services, including parental leave policies.
 - 3) Cultural biases should be eliminated to ensure equal support for all fathers.
 - 4) Systems should be expanded to include fathers who lack social support or access to resources.
 - 5) It is essential to consider indigenous cultures' best practices, which prioritize children through extended kinships.
 - 6) Communities should unite in embracing emotional expression for both genders and speaking out against stifling men's emotions and vulnerabilities.