

Fostering Father Involvement:
The Healthy Families New York
Experience

Second Annual Conference on Social
Work with and for Men

April 30, 2009

Benefits of Involving Fathers in Parent Education Programs

1. The fathers become more involved with their children outside of the program.
2. The fathers report fewer negative parenting practices (such as spanking) and more supportive parenting practices (such as complex play with the child).
3. *Mothers* report fewer negative parenting practices.
4. The fathers report improved attitudes about parenting, increased satisfaction with parenting, and improved perception of their ability to parent.

Fatherhood Initiative in Healthy Families *New York*

❖ **Three key questions.**

1. Who is considered a Father Figure (“FF”) and what are the demographics of fathers in Healthy Families New York (“HFNY”)?
2. What types of services do the Father Advocates (“FA”) offer and how do these services differ from those offered to mothers?
3. What challenges do Father Advocates face in their work?

❖ **Data Sources**

- MIS data collected on a cohort of families assessed in HFNY between 7/1/06 and 6/30/07.
- A series of focus groups and a survey of Father Advocates conducted in June 2008.
- A series of interviews with nine Father Advocates conducted in October and November 2008.

Who is a Father Figure?

Presence of HFNY Fathers at Assessment and Enrollment

	Total Assessments	Families with a Biological Father in the Home	Total Enrollment	Enrolled Families with a Biological Father in the Home	Enrolled Families with a Biological Father in the Home (Married)
All HFNY Sites	3139	43.4%	1911	39.5%	28%

- Most FAs define a Father Figure as any man in the home who has significant contact with the child.
- However, most Father Figures in HFNY are biological dads.

Demographics of HFNY Fathers

	Total Biological Dads Enrolled	White non- Hispanic	Black non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Foreign Born
All HFNY Sites	755	46.8%	15.1%	33.0%	32.3%

- The HFNY father population is very diverse.
- HFNY has a large population of immigrant fathers.

Needs and Concerns of HFNY Fathers

Socio-Economic Status of Biological Fathers in HFNY

	Total Biological Dads Enrolled	Not Fluent in English	Without HS Diploma	Unemployed
All HFNY Sites	755	16.6%	42.0%	31.8%

- HFNY fathers have significant disadvantages.
- Finding or keeping employment is a pressing concerns for most HFNY fathers.
- Many HFNY fathers have had poor or non-existent relationships with their own fathers.
- Improving parenting skills, improving the relationship with the child's mother, and learning about child development are other common needs.

HFNY Fatherhood Initiative Services

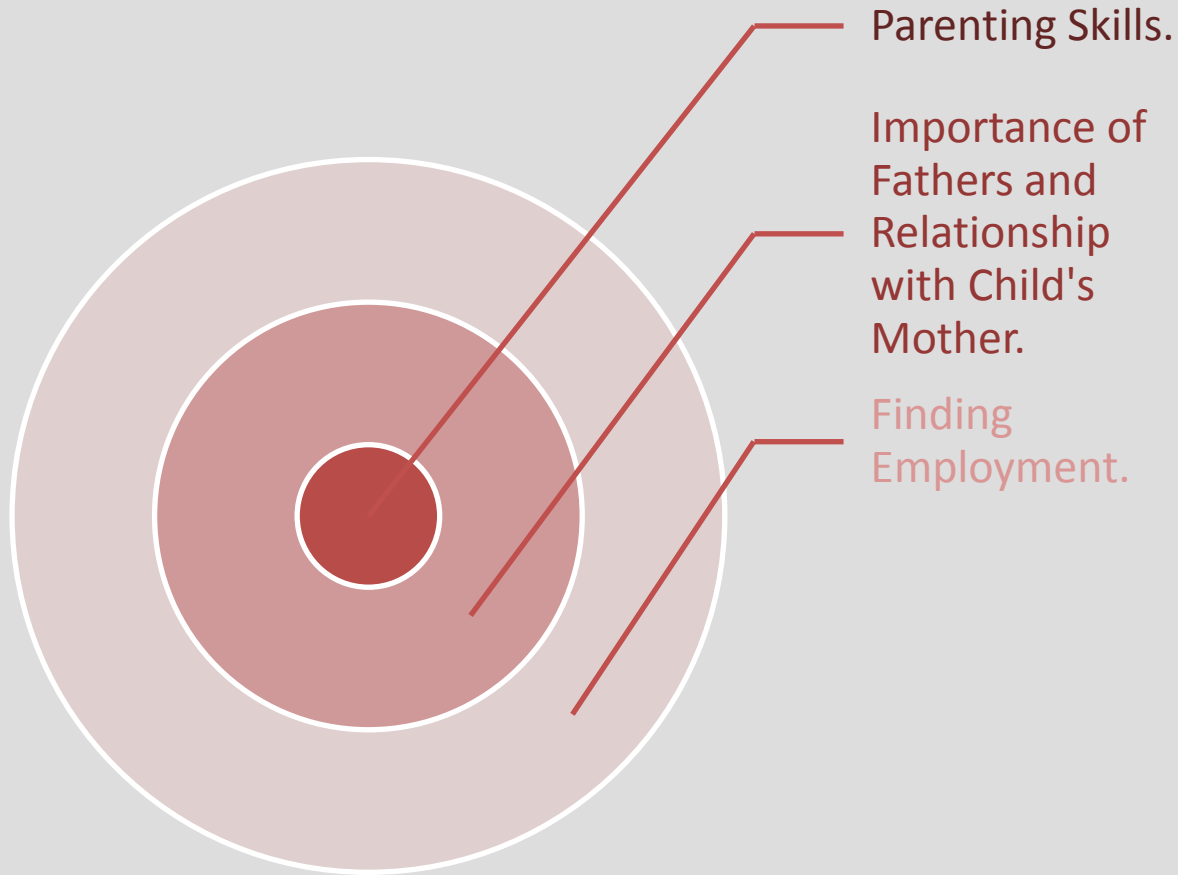
❖ Modes of Service Delivery

1. **Tandem home visits** where FSW and FA work with mother and father together.
2. **One-on-one sessions** where FA works with just the father and child.
3. **Fathers' groups** where the FA works with a group of fathers together.

❖ Services

- Core HFNY issues of parenting skills and child development (all FAs).
- Improving relationship with mother of child.
- Teaching importance of fathers to families.
- Setting specific goals and finding employment (fewer FAs).

Overlap of HFNY Services and Fathers' Needs



Services for Fathers

- Most FAs say the services offered to fathers do not differ much from services for mothers.
- Some FAs tailor services and activities to the parenting and communication styles of fathers.
- Some FAs say they use employment referrals more often with fathers than with mothers.

Challenges for Father Advocates

- ❖ Recruiting and retaining fathers
- ❖ Sometimes it's more difficult to recruit fathers from families that have been in the program a long time.
- ❖ Sometimes fathers need to have their concrete needs met before they can fully engage in HFNY.
- ❖ Often mothers and FSWs / FAWs operate as two sets of gatekeepers between father advocates and fathers.

Challenges for Father Advocates

❖ Training and Organizational Support

- In a survey of father advocates, *41%* stated that their agencies could better help them by *providing more training*.
- Several FAs suggested that topics specific to fatherhood be integrated into core FSW training.
- *35%* of FAs stated that their agencies should *provide more support including*, more guidance, direction, and supervision, as well as more funding.

Challenges for Father Advocates

- ❖ Integrating Fatherhood Initiative with HFNY
 - Many FAs stated that it was difficult to get the whole HFNY staff to accept and support them.
 - 98% of FSWs and 97% of FAWs are female. Often the FA is the only man at an HFNY site.
 - Many FAs perceive HFNY's organizational culture as neglectful of fathers and resistant to focusing on fathers.
 - Many FAs said that the HFNY staff has little knowledge of what FAs do and are responsible for.

Lessons Learned

- Fathers (and Father Figures) are present in many of the HFNY families.
- However, without focused outreach and recruitment, fathers are unlikely to participate in home visiting.
- Fathers have many of the same needs and concerns as mothers, but some that are different.
- Organizational support and specific training are crucial to maintaining a fatherhood program.