



THE FATHER'S ROLE: SUPPORTING FATHER INVOLVEMENT

The family paradigm that is most prevalent in social services typically focuses on the family as “a mother and her children.” This emphasis relegates fathers to a significantly diminished role and marginalizes their importance.

A growing body of research has concluded that fathers are important to their child's development, and yet the vast majority of programs that serve families with young children, especially low-income families, tend to focus almost exclusively on mothers. A father's involvement does not operate to the exclusion of a mother's relationship with the child. Fathering is uniquely different from mothering and equally beneficial to the child's development.

The first five years are a critical time to develop healthy patterns and family interactions, as early father involvement leads to sustained involvement over the course of the child's life, but, historically, family resource centers and programs have had a blind spot when it comes to involving fathers.

Research confirms that when fathers become more involved in parenting - and in working with mothers as co-parents and partners - you get healthier families and healthier children. The benefits for children include increases in academic, emotional and social competence and reduction in delayed development, poor standard of living, smoking, criminality, truancy, promiscuity, depression and anxiety. Equally important, positive father involvement decreases the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Engaged fathers experience better overall health, greater work satisfaction, and higher self-esteem. For mothers, the positive outcomes of father involvement include lower stress, less depression, and lower levels of impoverishment. Both partners experience greater satisfaction with the couple relationship, the quality of which directly affects the quality of a father's involvement with his child, regardless of whether the parents are married, separated, divorced, or have never been married.

The evidence is clear: *Programs to facilitate fathers' involvement with children must focus on the quality of family relationships, not simply on men's presence, absence, or financial contributions to child support.*

We invite you to learn more about The *Supporting Father Involvement* (SFI) Program, a family focused, evidence-based, clinical intervention aimed at effectively engaging fathers as key participants in family support and strengthening. Furthermore, the *SFI* Program encompasses a method of fostering organizational development and growth for agencies and professionals serving at-risk families.

THE SUPPORTING FATHER INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

In contrast to current public discussion of father involvement, which assumes that men's family involvement is a matter of having appropriate family values and motivation, the *SFI* Program is based on an empirically-supported family systems model of the central factors associated with fathers' family involvement, and on a belief that most fathers wish to be positively involved in their children's lives.

The SFI research and intervention program is based on five interconnected family domains known to affect family health, mental health, and child abuse outcomes:

- (1) individual characteristics of the parents
- (2) parent-child relationship quality
- (3) couple or co-parenting relationship quality
- (4) the intergenerational transmission of parent-child involvement and relationships
- (5) external influences such as employment, environmental stressors, and social supports.

The *SFI* model specifically targets and addresses each of these areas through a variety of modalities designed to meet the needs of culturally diverse, low-income families.

***SFI* is the first evidence-based program designed for families from various cultural backgrounds that reaches fathers by also reaching mothers and children.**

Research Underlying the *SFI* Program

The *Supporting Father Involvement* Program was developed through The Supporting Father Involvement Program, a research and intervention study active since 2003 in Family Resource Centers in five California counties.

The SFI Program was based on earlier studies showing the importance of fathers' positive involvement for children's and families' healthy development and well-being and was developed by researcher-clinicians with extensive experience in family-based preventive interventions. With funding from the California Office of Child Abuse Prevention in the Department of Social Services, the program was designed and carried out through a partnership among the Department of Social Services, local Family Resource Centers, and University faculty (U.C. Berkeley, Yale, and Smith College). The SFI Project currently includes five county Family Resource Centers, with a primarily African American site added in 2007 to the four primarily Caucasian and Latino sites included at the outset.

The Supporting Father Involvement Program represents the first randomized, controlled clinical trial focused on father involvement in low-and middle-income families.

The study compared father-only and father-mother interventions with each other and against a control group, and evaluated the impacts on families and children in the five targeted family life domains: individual, couple, parenting, families of origin, and outside stresses and social supports (e.g., employment). In addition to evaluating the effects of the intervention on the participants, the study assessed changes in outreach to fathers and in the provision of services to support fathers' role in family life at each Family Resource Center and its affiliated local, county, and state agencies.

Prior Research

The SFI Program was based on previous research by two of the designers of *SFI* (Drs. Phil and Carolyn Cowan), who demonstrated the importance of involved fathering on the lives of families through two earlier studies of working- and middle-class couples - the Becoming a Family Project for couples making the transition to parenthood and the Schoolchildren and their Families Project for parents with a first child making the transition to elementary school. Both of these earlier intervention studies compared the well-being and distress over time of randomly assigned couples group participants and similar couples with no intervention. Results revealed that couples groups for parents of young children, meeting weekly with trained leaders over four months to work on challenging family issues, had long-term positive effects on the quality of the parents' relationships as couples, their parenting strategies, and the children's adaptation from kindergarten through high school. Additionally, a third study, The Collaborative Divorce Project, led by Dr. Marsha Kline Pruett, revealed positive effects of similarly structured professionally led groups during or after divorce; parents' cooperation increased, conflict levels declined, and the fathers' involvement with their children increased.

The SFI Research Program

Phase I included 289 families, mostly low-income and Mexican-American, with youngest children aged birth to 7 years (average age 2.3 years), and with no open Child Protective Services case within the last year. The results have been reported at a number of scientific meetings in this country and abroad and in four published papers describing the qualitative and quantitative results.

The findings are clearly positive, particularly for participants in the couples groups. While the one-session information-only (the control) condition produced no significant positive changes over 18 months, the participants in both ongoing groups experienced significant benefits:

- Men and their partners in the *fathers* groups did not show the same increase in stress and anxiety over time that the control couples did, and their children did not show increases in problem behaviors as the control couples' children did, according to the parents themselves.

- Parents in the *couples* groups showed (1) significantly increased father involvement in childcare and psychological involvement, (2) couple satisfaction maintained over time (when it normally declines), (3) lower parenting stress, (4) lower personal distress, and (5) no increases in their children's problem behavior (aggression or hyperactivity) compared to children of parents in the control condition, who were described by their parents as exhibiting more problem behavior over the same period.
- The intervention effects reported above held across ethnic group membership, income level, and marital status, and were maintained 2.5 years after entering the study.
- During the first year, the agencies housing the SFI Project showed a significant improvement in their reputation for serving fathers, father-inclusive policies and procedures, the staff's preparation to provide services to fathers, and programs for fathers. These positive changes were maintained over the next three years.

Both intervention groups reduced risk factors that research shows are directly related to child abuse and neglect.

Phase II of the study involved adding 257 new families to the SFI Program, including an African American sample of families. Different from Phase I families, the composition of the new Phase II families did not necessarily include two biological parents and the age of the children ranged from birth to 11. In Phase II, there was no control condition and the majority of the families participated in couples groups, though there were 27 families in fathers groups.

- By repeating, and sometimes exceeding the positive results from Phase I, the Phase II results reinforced the conclusion that the *Supporting Father Involvement* intervention was effective in enhancing fathers' engagement with their children and improving relationships in the family as a whole. Similar to Phase I families, Phase II parents experienced a short-term decrease in anxiety and depression scores, parenting stress decreased, and father involvement in childcare increased, results which held when assessed 18 months after entering the study. Significantly, mothers identified the increase in father involvement.
- Compared to the control group whose couple distress increased over time, the intervention couples maintained their relationship quality.
- For couples group parents, mothers reported significantly less conflict with fathers about the children, and both partners reported a significant reduction in avoidant patterns and in violent problem solving behavior, such as yelling, throwing things, and slamming doors, when they disagreed with each other.

After a third experimental phase of the project (**Phase III**), we began **Phase IV** of the *Supporting Father Involvement* Program in July of 2009 in the original five counties. In Phase IV, the goal is to help families who have already come in contact with the Child Welfare System because of concern about the children's well-being. This phase will help us determine whether

the *SFI* Program benefits families encountering greater stress and challenges than those who have already found the program to be helpful.

Though not yet published, results from Phase IV are similarly promising. Examples include:

- The connection between the couple relationship and the use of drugs and/or alcohol was significantly affected. While the control group showed an increase in drug use associated with increased marital dissatisfaction, participation in the couples' intervention served to break the connection between difficulties in the marital relationship and increased substance use.
- Agencies housing the *SFI* program showed another increase in father-friendliness and father-inclusiveness five years after the program began, indicating the positive changes reported in Phase I took a deeper hold on the agencies.

THE *SFI* PROGRAM CURRICULUM

The *Supporting Father Involvement* Program entails a 32 hour curriculum typically led over 16 weeks (either for fathers only or for couples) by experienced clinicians, case management, and organizational change efforts designed for agencies serving primarily low-income families. Program staff at each site includes a project director, group leaders, and case managers.

The *SFI* curriculum includes activities, discussions, short presentations, and open-ended time for participants to raise immediate concerns from their own lives for group discussion and problem solving. Often, multiple versions of an activity are available for group leaders to choose from, thereby allowing leaders to meet the unique characteristics of that particular group while maintaining common agendas and group goals that are based on the aspects of family life to be addressed each session. The curriculum is designed to ensure that issues relevant to each of the five family domains are covered over the 16 weeks of meetings.

An important element of the *SFI* Program Curriculum is that group leaders do not prescribe specific behaviors for men and women as partners or as parents. Instead, they offer a group environment in which partners can explore their own predilections, goals and ways of relating to each other based on their own culture and values.

Summary of Curriculum Content

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| <u>Week 1</u> | The Individual: identifying one's self-concept and personal goals for change |
| <u>Week 2</u> | Parent-Child Relationships: understanding that involved fathers are important to their children's development and health |
| <u>Week 3</u> | The Couple: identifying and strengthening positive qualities of the couple/co-parenting relationship |
| <u>Week 4</u> | Parent-Child Relationships: reviewing effective parenting skills and strategies |
| <u>Week 5</u> | Parent-Child Relationships: dedicated time for fathers to interact with their youngest child, and for mothers to interact together |

- Week 6 The Couple: understanding the couple as a parenting team; division of parenting responsibilities and the ways that partners can support each other in their parenting roles
- Week 7 Three Generations: understanding and interrupting three-generational transmission of ineffective parenting styles
- Week 8 Outside The Family: identifying and utilizing social support
- Week 9 The Couple: reviewing problem solving skills and identifying communication styles
- Week 10 The Couple: continuation of Week 9 -- understanding body language and identifying some typical differences in parenting styles of mothers and fathers
- Week 11 The Individual: “spillover” of stresses from work to family and family to work; identifying ways of responding to and handling stress
- Week 12 Three Generations: setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries with parents and in-laws
- Week 13 Parent-Child Relationships: dedicated time for fathers to interact with their youngest child, and for mothers to interact together
- Week 14 Outside The Family: discussing the satisfaction and stress of being an economic provider and identifying effective ways to deal with community agencies
- Week 15 The Individual: recognizing and coping with depression; strengthening self-esteem
- Week 16 Tying Together Five Domains: wrap-up and integration of skills to solidify gains

Sample of Session Content for *SFI* Program Curriculum

Week 5

Fathers attend with youngest child; Mothers attend women’s group. Each Group Leader will lead one of the groups. Case managers join fathers’ group as additional resource for assistance and 1:1 teaching opportunities.

FOCUS: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

THEME: Time for fathers with their children and mothers together on their own

KEY POINTS:

- Knowing your child and doing activities with him/her is good for children and fathers.
- Mothers often have influence over fathers’ relationships with their children; the women’s support of the groups is important for all family members’ sense of closeness.

AGENDA FOR FATHERS/KIDS GROUPS (Agenda for Mothers/Womens Group not included):

1. Opening (15 min.)

Ask fathers to introduce their child and say something special about him/her, what stage the child is at now (learning to eat with a spoon, to walk, to sleep through the night, to throw a ball, and so on), or say what they like to do together.

2. Activities (35 min.)

(The following activities should be divided between Weeks 5 and 13. GL may choose how best to do this, based in part on the group composition i.e., age of the child).

Balloon Kick. Dads blow up big colorful balloons. On the signal each dad and child pair tries to keep the balloon in the air with only their feet. A winner is determined when the last team has its balloon in the air. (Alternative: On the signal, all dads and kids as a group try to keep the balloons in the air using any parts of their bodies.)

Volcano. Dads sit in a circle facing in with all the balloons on the floor inside the circle. On the signal the dads make the balloons “erupt” and make rumbling volcano sounds while the kids try to keep the balloons in the volcano.

Airplane. Dads hold their kids and follow the group leader’s commands of “ascend” and “descend”, “turn left” and “turn right”, “nosedive” and “loopy loop”, and so on.

Frog Stories. Dads take turns reading Frog Stories (by Mercer Mayer) aloud to the kids, which are in pictures only and especially good for younger children and fathers who cannot read.

3. Activity - How Well Do You Know Your Child? (1 hour)

This activity begins with one-on-one time between fathers and kids. Fathers choose four of the following questions to ask their child. They can choose based on the child’s age and what they would like to know about their child that they do not know now. Together (taking into account the age of the child) they draw the child’s answers to the father’s questions. Fathers and children then share the answers with the group.

Alternative: Ask dads with infants to create and demonstrate a special, signature flip or game with their child, or share a game they like to play together.

Questions:

- What is your child's favorite food?
- What are your child's most prized possessions?
- Who is your child's closest friend?
- What causes your child the greatest stress?
- What is your child's most prized accomplishment?
- What was your child's biggest discouragement this past year?
- What would your child like to be when she/he grows up?
- What is something that really upsets your child?
- What does your child like to do with you?
- What are your child's favorite games/toys to play?
- What are your child's favorite night time routines?
- What are your child's favorite things to do at school/day care?
- What does your child most dislike your saying "no" to him/her about?

4. Wrap-up (10 min.)

Every time parents and kids are together, they usually learn something new that brings them closer and helps them to understand each other better. Such learning opportunities are "Money in the bank for a rainy day." (have group explain what this means in terms of parent-child relationships).

How did you like being here together?

What did you like best about it?

What's one new thing you learned about your child?

Week 10

FOCUS: THE COUPLE

THEME: Problem solving and communication

KEY POINTS:

- Couples often communicate their feelings indirectly through body language; direct and open communication is more effective.
- Men and women express their feelings differently.

AGENDA:

1. Open check-in and check-in regarding last week's homework (15 min.)
2. Teaching Segment (15 min.)

Body language is an important part of how people communicate with each other. How you sit, stand, hold your arms, turn your body, make faces, etc. tells the other person a lot about how you're feeling. If you are speaking angrily, and you have your arms crossed and your body turned slightly away from your partner, he/she certainly gets the idea you are in no mood for compromise. Sometimes your body language is out of whack with your words: You say, "I'm not angry" but you turn away from your partner and make an angry gesture or snarl. That can be really confusing, if not intimidating, as your partner tries to figure out whether to respond to your words or the other message his/her body is giving you.

Go over handout: Positive Approaches to Communication

Let couples add to the lists from their own experience.

Have group members list out what kinds of body language suggest: anger, sadness, happiness, desire to make-up after a fight, and desire to talk about something difficult. Have them think about posture, eyes and mouth, arms, tone of voice.

3. Discussion (45 minutes)

One or two couples volunteer to discuss either (a) a problem that occurred this week (i.e., a time when things did not go well), or (b) an example of a time over the past week when they handled a problem better.

The same five principles from last week are used to guide the group about what they can all learn about couple relationships from this discussion.

4. Activity (35 min.)

Group divides into men and women. Each group discusses answers to the following question:

How are men and women different in the ways they express feelings, talk about their needs, and get their needs met?

Each group's answers are then shared with the larger group. Group Leaders underscore consistencies and differences across the genders.

5. Wrap-up and Homework (10 min.)

What did you learn tonight that will enable you to get along better with your partner or respond more positively to each other?

For homework: Try non-sexual ways of touching your partner/spouse. You can agree to touch each other 5 times per day for several days. The touch can include any behaviors you can dream up.

Or, try this more structured activity:

Cut out 10 phrases and make each one into a separate card. Place the cards in a manila envelope (approximately 5x8 inches). Include a trial size bottle of lotion and a snack size bag of M&M's. **See activity details** at the end of this curriculum in English and Spanish.

IMPLEMENTING THE *SFI* PROGRAM IN YOUR AGENCY:

Although the *SFI* Program Curriculum is not available commercially, we would like to share the Program with other family-service agencies while encouraging program fidelity so that the program can remain effective as it is implemented in various locales and with new populations. To do so, we offer to agencies interested in participating in the *SFI* Program **Agency and Staff *SFI* Readiness Training**.

The **Agency and Staff *SFI* Readiness Training** includes:

- A one day orientation to the *SFI* Program that covers:
 - The importance of father involvement and how fathers parent differently from mothers
 - Assessing your agency's father-friendliness using an adaptation of the *Father Friendliness Organizational Self Assessment (OSA)*
 - Integrating agency and individual practices to increase father involvement in individual agencies
 - An introduction to (and copy of) the *SFI* Program Curriculum
- Two additional days of staff training and technical assistance on implementing the *SFI* Program Curriculum for fathers and/or couples and on offering case management for the *SFI* Program. Training is provided to project directors, case managers, and group leaders concurrently.

Training Costs:

- \$3,000 per day per trainer (2 trainers required)
- After the initial training, further technical assistance can be obtained from any of the *SFI* Program staff for \$150/hour and from one of the four *SFI* Program developers for \$200/hour.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Supporting Father Involvement was designed by the team of Dr. Philip A. Cowan, Dr. Carolyn Pape Cowan, Dr. Marsha Kline Pruett, and Kyle D. Pruett, MD.

For further information on *SFI*, please contact:

Phil Cowan, Ph.D. and Carolyn Cowan, Ph.D.
University of California Berkeley
pcowan@berkeley.edu; ccowan@berkeley.edu
510.643.5608

Marsha Pruett, Ph.D.
Smith College School for Social Work
mpruett@smith.edu
413.585.7997

Kyle Pruett, M.D.
Yale Child Study Center
kyle.pruett@yale.edu
413.584.3200

REFERENCE LIST

- Cowan, C. P., Cowan, P. A., Pruett, M. K., & Pruett, K. (2005). Encouraging strong relationships between fathers and children. *Working Strategies*, 8(4), 1-11.
- Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., & Pruett, K. D. (2007). An approach to preventing co-parenting conflict and divorce in low-income families: Strengthening couple relationships and fostering fathers' involvement. *Family Process*, 46, 109-121.*
- Cowan, C.P., Cowan, P.A., Cohen, N., Pruett, M.K., & Pruett, K. (2008). Supporting fathers' involvement with kids. In Jill Duerr Berrick and Neil Gilbert (Eds.). *Raising Children: Emerging needs, modern risks, and social responses*. (pp. 44-80). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cowan, P.A., Cowan, C.P., Pruett, M.K., & Pruett, K. (2009). Six barriers to father involvement and suggestions for overcoming them. *National Council of Family Relations Report*. Spring. F1-F4.
- Cowan, P.A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., & Pruett, K.D., & Wong, J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventive interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 71, 663-679.** #
- Pruett, M. K., Cowan, C. P., Cowan, P. A., & Pruett, K. (2009). A Cross-cultural preventive intervention for low-income families with young children. *Journal of Social Services Research*, 35, 163-169.*
- Pruett, M.K., Cowan, C.P., Cowan, P.A., & Pruett, K. (2009). Fathers as resources in families involved in the child welfare system. *Protecting Children*. 24, 52-65.*

* Peer reviewed publication

** Peer reviewed publication; randomized clinical trial

National Council of Family Relations' Research and Theory Section awarded this article The Men-in-Families *Best Research Article* Award for 2009.