Encourage Moms to Include Dads

1) **Address the Barriers to Mom Including Dad**

In some families, Dad’s relationship with Mom and Mom’s perception of Dad’s role may be barriers to Dad becoming more involved in his children’s lives. Mom may act as a “gatekeeper” by regulating Dad’s contact with the child(ren). While this is sometimes due to a bad relationship between Mom and Dad, it can occur for many other reasons (see sidebar).

WIC staff should talk to mothers about their influence on Dad’s involvement and discuss how they can facilitate their partner’s involvement in ways that will be helpful not only for Dad, but for Mom and the baby as well. Moms are very important for getting Dads involved, because, even with fatherhood outreach, they are the parent most likely to be present at WIC.

To support Moms in including Dads, WIC staff can:

- Talk to mothers in your office about the importance and the benefits of Dad’s involvement. Explain to Moms that you depend on them to get Dad more involved.
- Work to address Moms’ concerns and encourage them to cooperate with Dads.
- Get suggestions from Moms on how to best involve Dads in WIC activities.
- Ask Mom to schedule her next office visit for a time when Dad can come in, too.
- If delivering positive parenting programs, specifically invite both Mom and Dad.

**Main reasons why Mom may resist Dad’s involvement:**

- Efficiency – “It’s faster if I feed the kids myself.”
- Quality – “I do a better job of changing the babies’ diapers.”
- Sympathy – “I don’t want to bother him while he’s watching TV.”
- Admiration – “He works so hard…he shouldn’t have to come home and feed the kids, too.”
- Anger – (This happens a lot when Mom and Dad are no longer romantically involved.)
- Cultural beliefs about gender roles – “Men don’t prepare meals or change diapers…that’s women’s work.”

- Adapted from *Key Concepts: Including Dads in a WIC Setting*
Encourage Mom to:
- Give Dad time with the baby to learn how to comfort him/her. This will improve his confidence as a parent and give Mom a break.
- Encourage Dad to be involved. Mom’s encouragement will help Dad become the skilled and engaged parenting partner she needs.
- Give Dad the benefit of the doubt: don’t assume that he does not want to be involved.
- Share and discuss with Dad the information that she learns at WIC.

2) BE SENSITIVE TO MOMS’ FEELINGS AND CONCERNS

An unintended consequence of including Dads in programming is that Moms may feel left out. Moms may be concerned that they will lose ownership over the program if Dad gets involved. Some Moms may resent the program celebrating father engagement because Dad may not have been as engaged as Mom in the child’s life from the beginning.

To ease tension regarding special events or services for Dads:
- Make sure there are parallel activities and groups for Moms.
- Ask for Moms’ advice and input on father involvement.
- Offer Moms the opportunity to explore their feelings about being a co-parent. (See more on co-parenting below.)
- Remind Moms of the benefits to their children when Dad is involved.
- Be sensitive when suggesting mixed parenting groups as many women may feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions in a group with men or vice versa. You may want to have separate male and female parent groups. However, it depends on the needs of your participants. (See section on parenting groups and benefits of couples groups below.)

3) WHEN APPROPRIATE, FOCUS ON CO-PARENTING:

Co-parenting is shared decision making about what is in the best interest of a child. Each parent still contributes their unique strengths to the child-parent relationship but work together to make child rearing decisions.

Recent research has shown that the single strongest predictor of whether a father will be involved with his child is the quality of his relationship with the child’s mother. This is true whether or not the parents are in a romantic relationship with
each other. Conflicts around child rearing are a primary source of marital/relationship problems. Therefore, an emphasis on co-parenting, where parents work together and agree on the best ways to raise their child, has positive outcomes for the family as a whole.

WIC staff can encourage co-parenting and improved communication by:

- Suggesting to parents that it can strengthen the couple’s relationship if both are “on the same page” when it comes to parenting.
- Considering the feelings of both parents when making suggestions.
- Affirming each parent’s knowledge and understanding of their child and acknowledging their unique contributions as a parent.
- Explaining the benefits a child receives when two parents are both supporting the child’s well-being.
- Reminding parents that it takes time and effort to become an effective co-parenting team, so they should not feel discouraged if it is difficult at first.
- Promoting parenting classes and support groups either at WIC or at other community organizations.

**The Benefits of Parenting Groups:**

Both men and women benefit from guidance and support during the transition to parenthood. This is where parenting support groups can help:

Recent research from the ‘Supporting Father Involvement Project’ shows that parenting group participants were found to be warmer, more encouraging, and more responsive to their child’s needs, as well as better at setting limits than those parents who did not attend a group. These benefits lasted for years after attending the parenting group.

Parenting support groups can involve both parents or be for fathers only and mothers only. Based on the research, father involvement increased whether Dads attended father groups or couple groups. Couple groups have some additional benefits as well (see box on the next page).

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**“When a father perceives that his partner has confidence in his parenting ability, he feels motivated and competent as a parent. These feelings of motivation and confidence reinforce his involvement and his satisfaction with the parent role.”**

-Head Start Father Engagement Programming Guide
If the biological father is not around, or if Mom does not feel comfortable naming him, WIC staff can suggest that Mom provide WIC with contact information for a supportive male family member or friend who is involved in the child’s life.

- For example, in situations where there is family violence, it may be better for Mom and child(ren) to not involve Dad.
- If you do not already have them, establish policies and procedures for working with families who have court orders, custody issues or abuse/domestic violence.
- Staff should use methods that are safe, honest and respectful when communicating with Dads in complicated family circumstances.

**ACTION ITEMS FOR WIC STAFF:**

- Explain to Moms the benefits of father involvement.
- Encourage Moms to include Dads and to facilitate their involvement with WIC.
- Be sensitive to Moms’ feelings and address Moms’ concerns about including Dads.
- Ask for Moms’ input on how Dads could be involved.
- Encourage co-parenting.
- If possible, offer parenting groups at your WIC clinic or refer participants to parenting groups in the community.

**Some additional benefits specific to couples’ parenting groups are:**

- Both parents can experience and learn the same material, which helps parents to feel like a team while parenting.
- Sharing the experience of the parenting group reduces the likelihood that one parent will be seen as the expert with more knowledge and parenting ability than the other.
- Parents experience increased satisfaction with their relationship with each other and decreased conflict and parenting stress.
Resources

- Dedicated to Dads: Lessons from Early Head Start from Head Start
- Key Concepts: Including Dads in a WIC Setting from Texas WIC
- Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide
- Promoting Father Involvement in Early Childhood from FRIENDS National Resource Center
- Step by Step: Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families from Best Start Resource Centre
- Involving Men in Nurturing from Prevent Child Abuse Vermont
- The Daddy-Baby Connection from Parenting Magazine
- How to Get Dads Involved? It’s a Family Affair from Berkeley Greater Good Science Center
- Supporting Father Involvement from Family Resource Centers