



WISCONSIN STATEWIDE FATHERHOOD NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our Journey

UW-Madison Division of Extension realized we were not serving fathers in our outreach programming at anywhere near the same extent that we had been serving mothers. Given the importance of fathers for child development and family well-being, fathers should be a major target audience for Extension programming as well as for other family-serving organizations and community service providers. Given that fathers are systematically underserved in these areas, we decided to intentionally assess what fathers in Wisconsin need and where the gaps are in current services before creating new programming.

Methods

Thirty-five fathers gave input via seven focus groups (one in Spanish and six in English).

Fathers in different parenting situations participated: fathers with full custody, fathers who share custody with co-parents, fathers without custody, and fathers impacted by the criminal legal system.

Thirty-two community partners provided input via twelve interviews and six surveys. Organizations included but were not limited to family service providers, child protection, domestic violence agencies, human services, and jails.

Findings



BIG PICTURE QUESTION 1:

How do fathers define successful fatherhood?

Fathers shared what fatherhood meant to them: active involvement, nurturing relationships, and role modeling. Another finding emerged around fathers' desire to be fathers and to be involved with their children, despite the numerous barriers and challenges fathers face.



BIG PICTURE QUESTION 2:

What do Wisconsin fathers need most?

Fathers' needs emerged into four main themes: **1) Basic Life Needs and Resources;** **2) Parenting Support;** **3) Systemic Barriers to Fatherhood;** and **4) Challenges and Consequences Related to the Legal System.** Overall, fathers need more than just parenting support. Their ability to get their basic needs met and to successfully navigate the legal system (both criminal and family court) impede their ability to be fully engaged in their fatherhood role. This is further exacerbated by society's attitudes and gender norms that negatively impact fathers.



BIG PICTURE QUESTION 3: What are possible solutions?

Opportunities for future programming to better support fathers includes: 1) helping fathers and father figures with parenting by designing **programming and resources** for fathers' specific needs; 2) **creating spaces** for fathers to come together around their role as parents; 3) **adapting** existing parenting programming and resources to be more inclusive and welcoming towards fathers; 4) helping fathers **advocate** for their rights; and 5) increasing society's value of fathers through broadly **disseminating research and information** about the importance of fatherhood for family well-being.

This report demonstrated the many challenges fathers face in being present for their children and highlighted the need to re-evaluate how we as a culture value fathers, fatherhood, and parenting more broadly. Fathers in this needs assessment repeatedly expressed challenges to being included and welcomed across many parenting contexts, and are unable to overcome the expectation that their primary role in the family is to be a financial provider. **Meeting the needs of fathers, those discussed in this report and more broadly, is likely to result in downstream benefits for the whole family, and is of critical importance.**

Recommendations



Disseminate findings and collaborate across sectors

We suggest that community partners facilitate discussions with people in their organization and communities. Use this report, and corresponding products, to talk to others about father-related initiatives or the importance of valuing fathers.



Create and facilitate peer support for fathers

One of the most prevalent findings in this report across both fathers and community partners is the desire for fathers to learn from and support each other. We recommend that family serving agencies work to provide an environment for fathers to foster social connections and facilitate peer groups of fathers with shared experiences.



Hire and engage more men in family serving professions

For people to feel welcome and included, family serving organizations must have staff that reflects the diversity of the populations served. This necessitates recruiting, hiring, and retaining fathers as staff and program leaders.



Engage mothers and other parental figures in fatherhood work

In order for fathers to be successful, mothers and other parental figures need to partner in the process of elevating positive fatherhood. Mothers and other co-parents must reflect on gatekeeping behaviors and acknowledge the importance of involving fathers in their children's lives.



Increase awareness of attitudes and stigmas that serve as barriers to father engagement

More broadly, systemic change within our communities and culture in which fathers live must be a priority. Partners should proliferate communities with positive messages and images of fatherhood, as well as research that highlights the critical importance of father engagement in family well-being.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Perhaps you are a director of an agency and will call a meeting to discuss fatherhood, or perhaps you will decide to talk with a coworker about father-related initiatives. Another starting point is to speak up, even in small ways, when you notice fathers being excluded, stereotyped, or otherwise devalued. Remind people around you that fathers are more than babysitters or financial providers. If you are a family service provider, make small steps towards including fathers. Try some things out, talk with fathers, keep what works over time and adapt. View this as a marathon, not a sprint.

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