

The Grill!: Creating Dad-Friendly Spaces within Parent Programming

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The year is 2017, and we have seen a lot of changes within the home and workplace. In our society we now have more women engaged in their careers and more families functioning on a dual income. Both of these factors contribute to more women returning to work during their children's early years. To complement this, we have a generation of fathers who are motivated to be fully involved in parenting. Finally, we also have more families with same-sex or gender-fluid parents. These factors all contribute to a shift in the dynamics around parenting roles and the need for parenting groups to find successful strategies to engage fathers.

While the cultural shift that supports fathers being more involved in parenting began to take place during our parents' generation, many areas have remained, for the most part, the mother's domain. Children's groups are one of these areas. Women seem to be the majority of facilitators of these support groups, and mothers are the primary parent attending. This dynamic, by nature, will create a system geared towards the female perspective. This is not wrong or purposefully exclusive; it is just the nature of the majority influencing the content.

What it means for fathers is that these groups can often be uncomfortable and intimidating. I think of women breaking into the work-

place and how it must feel to be the sole female in an otherwise male-dominant boardroom. I suspect this is the same feeling a father has when entering his first StrongStart session. He is a pioneer as an emotionally engaged dad with a toddler. To best support these fathers as early childhood educators or group facilitators, we need to be culturally sensitive to the fathers participating in these groups. By creating groups that use father-friendly ways to connect, we can enhance the communication and participation of fathers.

Of course I am speaking broadly, as all dads and facilitators are different, but generally I have found how men and women get comfortable in a new environment is often very



Drop-in group for dads and young children in Nelson, BC.

different. Moms tend to get comfortable by communicating, where dads may lean towards physical play and activity with their child. While there are individual preferences, I have found that circle time and singing circles are equivalent to Kryptonite to the average father. It does not seem like a comfortable way for them to open up and connect. Fathers do not seem to get together to talk about their experiences in the same way mothers do. How often do you see a group of men pushing strollers down the street together? Probably not as often as you see a group of mothers pushing strollers together. Men tend to connect to their spaces and each other in more activity-oriented ways. A funny line I heard about men from comic Jeff Foxworthy captures this: "Once men become friends, they may never speak to each other again. They are too busy competing!" Of course, the truth is when you are a new father, you do need to share and listen to your peers to help with that feeling of being all on your own and to know that many of your struggles seem to be universal among other new fathers. The way to get fathers to that point is through creating comfortable dad-friendly spaces where fathers can begin to show up.

I created such a space when I took over a weekly drop-in group for dads and young children on Saturday mornings. This program had been struggling with retaining and engaging fathers. The first thing I did was eliminate circle time and any group-sharing elements. I used background music to break the silence and kept the coffee fresh and flowing. In a relatively short time, the group was busy, lively, and very comfortable. A craft and other activities are still available, but the

dads generally head to the playroom with their children, where it gets very messy and playful. This Saturday breakfast group has become an open and very comfortable space for dads to share with one another.

It is from this group that dads then begin to sign up for our other dads' groups that are more focused on

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support and verbal communication. They have already developed a comfortable relationship with each other and the facilitators in a more informal environment, and so by the time they come to this group, they are very open to communication. This format has worked so well that I encourage new dads to come to the Saturday drop-in first and then move onto the more focused support group.

If you do not have the luxury of having two groups in your organization, you may want to employ the strategy of starting your group with more informal, play-based activities and slowly introduce more

communication-based or formal group activities. Think about activities that men are generally comfortable with and through which they can connect with each other. I had a society in a neighboring town ask me if I would be willing to start a dads' group for them. They said they had tried a number of times in the past but had difficulty with registry and fathers showing up. They then went on to say that the only time they had a reasonable number of dads come out for anything was when they had a family barbecue. Where do you think the fathers all were? Huddled around the grill cooking burgers and having a great time. Why was that the only successful event for that location? The grill, of course. Men tend to be very comfortable using the barbecue, and due to certain cultural ideology, they may think they are the only one in the family capable of handling such a complex cooking apparatus! My suggestion would be to use a connecting point like this to establish relationships and then have the communication organically unfold from being shared comfortably.

There are many different ways you can work to create a group environment that is supportive to fathers and children. While I have provided a few general ideas, each person and group is, of course, unique, and so your approach will always be adjusted to the individual situation. My point is that creating dad-friendly activities and places within your gathering spaces will support fathers to continue to break ground in this new time, and it will help them be the emotionally available dad they all want to be!

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