

Work With Dads

“The relationship is built by how you come across to the dads. At first, you want to spend 90% listening and 10% talking. Remember that you won’t solve everything in a day or a week.”

Barry McIntosh,
Young Fathers of Santa Fe

“The first contact is most important. Don’t say something like, ‘I can’t help you today. Come back tomorrow.’ They won’t come back.”

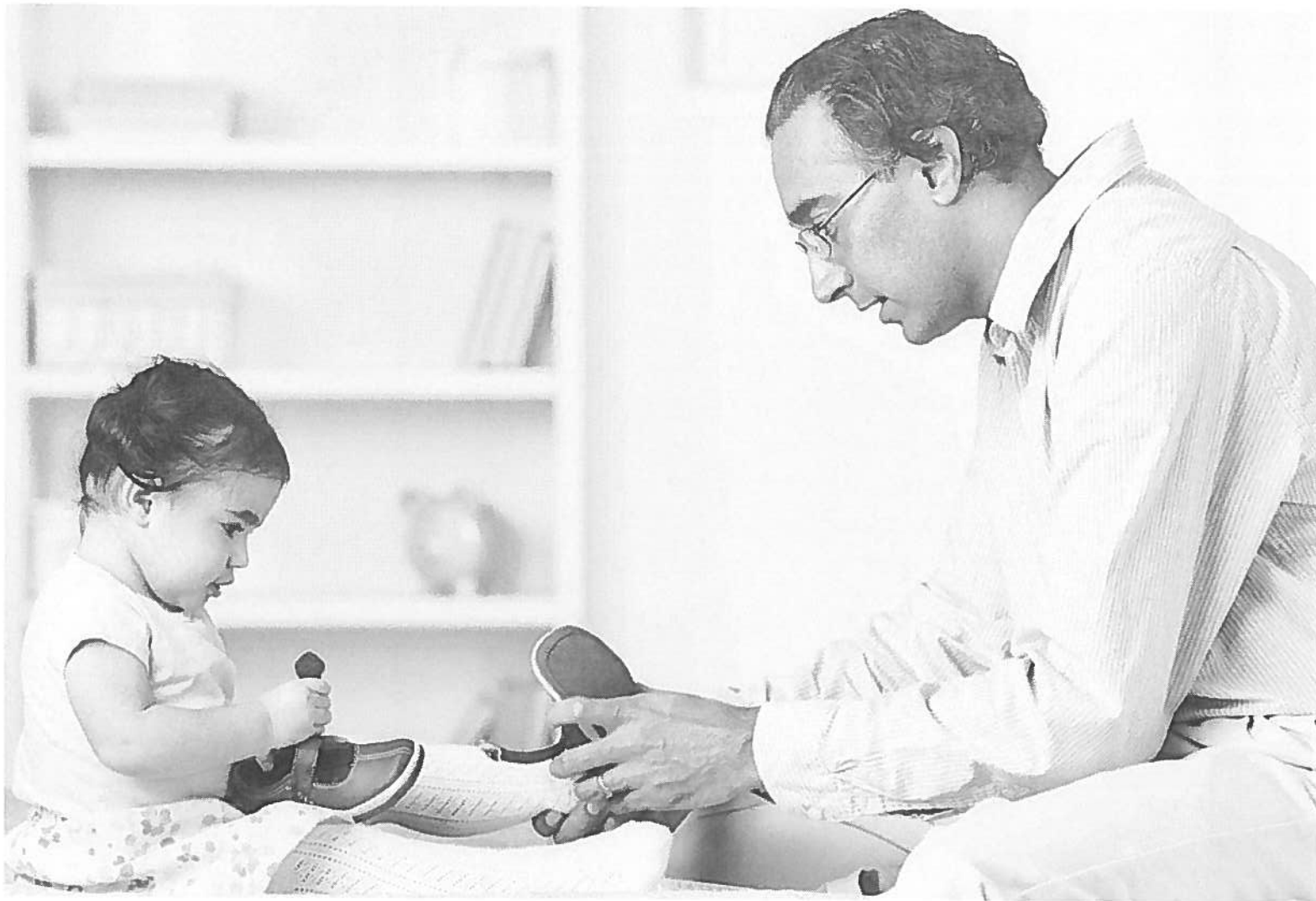
Patricia Littlejohn,
South Carolina Center
for Fathers and Families

Although many fatherhood program activities take place in group settings, critical work can also occur on a one-to-one basis. In fact, whether a father even decides to join a program can depend on the first one-to-one encounter with a staff member. One-to-one interaction and group activities both have important roles in helping fathers successfully complete a program. Workshops led by facilitators can generate tremendous positive energy among a group of fathers and influence retention. Similarly, the quality of individualized interaction and case management can affect how long a person stays in the program and whether he follows through in achieving his goals.

One-to-One Work

The first one-to-one participant-staff interaction typically takes place before enrollment. This conversation is generally informal and may be on the phone or in person at a teen health clinic, court proceeding, doctor’s office, or street corner. No matter where it occurs, this conversation is likely to be crucial in a father’s decision whether to get involved with a program. Preparing staff to engage in these conversations is critical to success. Staff members who work one-to-one with fathers should be aware of their own skills and limitations so they know when they can help a father directly or need to seek assistance from a colleague or partner agency with more specialized knowledge.

Experienced outreach workers emphasize the importance of listening and taking cues from the dad’s comments. A father might speak about his need for a job to generate income so he can meet child support obligations, which presents an opportunity to discuss how the fatherhood program can help with employment as well as developing a stronger father-child relationship. Some men express frustration about their relationships with the mothers of their children or the court system, which provides the opportunity to develop trust with fathers by listening to them carefully, empathizing with their situation, talking about co-parenting, and explaining how the program might be able to help them navigate the court system and improve their communication or presentation skills. Many practitioners agree on the importance of not overpromising what they or the program can deliver; ultimately, that will result in a loss of trust.



“It’s important to maintain a non-judgmental approach and build a relationship from the start.”

Barry McIntosh,
Young Fathers of Santa Fe

“Participants must know that if they slip and fall we’ve got them...they have to feel they belong.”

Joe Jones,
Center for Urban Families

The overall “feel” of a program can determine whether fathers stay or leave. Fatherhood practitioners agree that showing genuine concern and interest in establishing a long-term relationship are essential to creating trust. Listening carefully to figure out the father’s needs, addressing urgent or initial needs, and always demonstrating honesty and trust are cited as essential skills for one-to-one work.

Many men who come to fatherhood programs struggle with depression and low morale as a result of life experiences and current circumstances. They have often felt rejected and let down by various institutions and programs. Many have not had loving, actively involved fathers in their lives. Therefore, helping dads identify and manage their emotions—anger, resentment, disappointment—can be a key component of successful one-to-one contact. “Try to get them out of the eye of the storm. Calm them down, slow them down, and help them to see things more objectively,” one fatherhood program manager recommended.

“Be responsive to guys and be willing to take some risks.”

Patricia Littlejohn,
South Carolina Center
for Fathers and Families

Case Management

The following are key components of case management:

- **Build relationships** – Case management often involves a professional relationship grounded in trust that can provide effective support and accountability. Some programs conduct a rolling intake process in which case managers gather information gradually through informal discussion. The most important outcome of this process is to build a father’s trust in the counselor or case manager. Counselors build trust by listening, remaining objective about a father’s problems, and providing a supportive environment.
- **Assess needs** – Case managers usually conduct a needs assessment, but as one program staff member noted, “We don’t use that term because it sounds like a clinical study.” The goal is “to have frank, open conversations with the men we serve.” Those discussions play a large part in determining the services they need. “We’ve had guys confess to having open warrants. We then set them up to have legal representation so they walk in protected.”
- **Set goals** – Develop a realistic plan for the future to incorporate both short-term and long-term goals. Plans should document the goals and be updated frequently, both to document and foster progress toward future goals. “We often take the situation in bite-size pieces,” one practitioner noted. If a father struggles to gain visitation rights or has trouble interacting with his child, a case manager can offer encouragement but suggest patience. “There is so much water under the bridge.” A mom or a child “will have to see you acting differently” before their own behavior can change. “I try to de-emotionalize the situation and have them look at it differently.”
- **Take a step-by-step approach** – Identify the action steps that will help the father reach his goals. For example, many fathers want a job or a better job to provide for their children, so case managers can take steps to assess the man’s skills and interests. Young Fathers of Santa Fe follows a strategy in which fathers are given tasks to assess their capabilities: Does he know how to do a basic job search? What are his basic literacy skills? Many have no experience looking for a job. They may need help preparing a

resume or leaving a message on a potential employer's answering machine. Some will need a referral to an adult basic education program to develop their reading and writing skills. By assigning dads "little things to do" (e.g., writing a description of their general interests, preparing a list of jobs they have done, looking through online job listings, or practicing leaving a voice mail message), the program can more accurately assess needs, help fathers set attainable goals, and enable them to move forward.

- **Make referrals and follow up** – Programs cannot meet every need of a father through in-house services. Successful programs build on their understanding of the community and established partner relationships to address a father's needs and help him reach his goals. Effective referrals involve more than just providing a phone number. Case managers should, when able, directly introduce a father to the referral source. Additionally, staff should follow up with both the father and the referral source regarding progress. Some of the needs that might be addressed include housing, employment, substance abuse, child support, and visitation issues.
- **Promote self-esteem** – Even if they display a veneer of silent strength and toughness, many dads have low self-esteem that is reinforced if they are non-custodial parents. Young dads, in particular, often need a boost, especially if they face anger from the family of their child's mother. One program invites graduates back to speak to new participants. Other programs take current program participants, who are young dads themselves, to speak at pregnancy prevention classes in high schools. The presenters gain skills and confidence while new program participants or students hear from those who have dealt with a real-life problem.
- **Keep fathers on track** – Individualized activities help sustain men's lives and are an opportunity to develop a personalized strategic plan. But many dads are in danger of going "off course" through the normal routines of life. Being available to respond to crises and having regular one-to-one sessions can help keep men on course for success. These meetings are also an opportunity to refine or tweak goals and add new ones, depending on a dad's changing circumstances.

Case management is a collaborative process of assessment, planning, facilitation, care coordination, evaluation, and advocacy for options and services to meet an individual's and family's comprehensive needs through communication and available resources to promote quality, cost-effective outcomes.⁴¹

⁴¹ Case Management Society of America. *What is a case manager?* Retrieved from <http://www.cmsa.org/Home/CMSA/WhatisaCaseManager/tabid/224/Default.aspx>

Working with fathers through home visits, the **Dads Make a Difference** program of **Healthy Families San Angelo** in Texas uses an activity that asks dads what they want for their child. Men can choose from items such as good health, politeness, being good in school, excelling in sports, and other goals. When men rank the top three or four items on their wish list, staff can then focus discussion toward these goals. For example, if a dad of a newborn wants his child to be a good athlete, the counselor will encourage him to lie down on the floor with the baby on his stomach. The baby's act of raising his or her head supports muscular development. "It's an activity that builds kids' bodies for the future," one program case manager said. "Some dads think they just wait until a child is 14 to start working on athletics, but that's not the case."

One-to-one meetings require extensive planning by case managers. While strategic plans provide a focus for both the father and practitioner, one-to-one discussions often veer into new or unexpected areas. "Always make time for planning," one practitioner said. The long-range goal of such plans is to "deal with the cause of a crisis, not just the crisis of the week."

Maintaining accurate and up-to-date records is critical for effective case management. Using MIS software can make record keeping more efficient, allow for controlled access by other team members, and allow for more dynamic assessment of overall participant needs and engagement. Software systems come in many variations. Programs should carefully consider the costs, both initially and to maintain the system, and their needs and capacity before selecting one. The Center for Urban Families uses Efforts to Outcomes from Social Solutions to maintain its case management records.

Top Takeaways

The following are some key considerations in one-to-one work with dads:

- A dad's first impression of a fatherhood program and staff is a lasting one, and it is important to engage him from the start.
- Individual fathers usually face various challenges, not all of which will be apparent at the first or second encounter. Developing a relationship of trust and respect is important to ensure they actively seek help in dealing with particular issues.
- Offering advice and encouragement on identified issues and involving other staff members as necessary will help staff balance the help they provide to individual fathers. When appropriate, refer clients to services within or outside the program.

Once a trusting relationship is established, much of the one-to-one work involves assistance with a variety of life issues. These issues might relate to personal development, employment, legal problems, child support, parenting, relationships, or other challenges.