

## Dads as volunteers

*Does your school want more dads to volunteer? Acknowledge their strengths and assume they want to be equal partners in child care, says one expert.*

Does your child's school parent association have male participation? Do fathers regularly volunteer to help organize school events? Do you see a lot of men at many school functions other than sports events? The answers to those questions may be predicated on the dynamics of what men perceive to be their role within the family unit, as well as outside of it.

On Oct, 10, 2007, Dr. Brad Sachs, a family psychologist, author of several books, and founder and director of the Father Center, spoke to parent association presidents from member schools and Parent Network school representatives about promoting parental school involvement, and specifically about getting fathers more involved. Dr. Sachs explained that, in order to understand how men view themselves in their roles as husband, father and provider, one needs to look at several factors, including the history of male involvement in child rearing. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, men were intrinsically involved in the child-rearing process. Once fathers began to leave home to go to work, there began decades of alienation of men from that process. This historical tide turned with the advent of the Feminist movement and the increased rate of divorce, when fathers began to be "yoked" into the childrearing process, forcing them to be more intimately involved.

Other factors arise that also present a challenge to paternal involvement; chief among them is the male perception that if they are involved with their children, they have "failed" at their main role of provider. Many men have grown up without male role models, and consequently there may be feelings of incompetence and helplessness in trying to give what they never received themselves, and there can also be issues with their wives support, or lack thereof, in their role, and how it is defined.

Dr. Sachs went on to illustrate that in spite of these challenges, there are many similarities between men and women, and, ultimately, "there is no evidence that mothers are biologically predisposed to be better parents than men," rather it is societal views that are the primary reason for how parents perceive they should divide responsibilities. Society in general tends to carry narrow, limited views of what men really are all about. We tend to view a father's role as auxiliary--as a supplement, instead of a complement to the mother's role. This is described as the "deficit model" viewpoint of men, which claims that men have an unwillingness to adjust, are resistant to change, harbor a reluctance to relinquish power, fear of intimacy, and are mostly adept at an entire laundry list of "un's"—uncaring, uncommitted, uninterested, unmotivated, etc. Dr. Sachs argues that this model greatly "ignores" many attributes of men, including the potential for growth and maturation; their deepest motives, feelings, and dreams; their unique definitions and expressions of competent, creative childcare, and their willingness to work hard.

Dr. Sachs presented data from various studies which show that active paternal involvement produces such desired things like higher academic achievement, increased self confidence, healthier interpersonal relationships, and morally sound behavior in children. In fact, 74% of men say they would rather have a “daddy track job than a fast track job”. The data is equally clear that if fathers are not actively involved in childrearing, many undesirable things occur, such as: Girls without a father are 2.5 times as likely to get pregnant, and 53% more likely to commit suicide, and boys without a father are 63% more likely to run away from home, and 37% more likely to abuse drugs. Children of either gender without paternal involvement are twice as likely to abuse alcohol/drugs, twice as likely to be incarcerated, and four times as likely to need psychological treatment.

Given the overwhelming evidence of the positive nature of a father’s involvement in raising children, the question for many becomes how do we get them more actively involved in the things that concern parents outside of the home? Dr. Sachs believes that one aid is to broaden the definition of paternal involvement to include many things like: communication, teaching, monitoring, affection, planning, protection, support, etc. After that, we must build upon a man’s motivation to develop close relationships with his children. By listening carefully to the unique perspective, concerns, needs and strengths of the father, we would do much to break down the deficit model, as would distinguishing the differences between mothers and fathers in a positive way, viewing them as assets rather than liabilities. Dr. Sachs was emphatic that we do not want to bring men into any school/community activity expecting them to be mothers. Further, we must practice active outreach to men, while honoring men’s ambivalence and fears that may accompany greater paternal involvement. Also, we should attempt to create a vision rather than provoking guilt to get them involved, and acknowledge the strengths men bring to parenting. The removal of workplace barriers so that men do not have to always choose between participating in an activity of their children, and making money, is also necessary. The goal is to broaden fatherhood beyond the father-child relationship and into the school community. Many in the audience apparently believed that all it really takes is asking men for their help. The bottom line, according to Dr. Sachs, is that we must ask them with a sense of shared responsibility in mind, and not as just asking for “help.”

*By Jackie Fong*