

# AMCHP Fact Sheet

## FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN MCH PROGRAMS

### Introduction

Father involvement in families' and children's lives is an emerging issue, as the social paradigm of the role of fathers is shifting. State Title V programs are increasingly incorporating fathers into their maternal and child health (MCH) programmatic work. These programs have an important role in facilitating communication and expanding collaborations among state and local agencies and programs to increase father involvement with MCH populations.

### Background

In 2006, the United States Census Bureau reported that 26 percent of all children (19.3 million) lived with one parent and the majority (88 percent) of these children lived with their mother.<sup>i</sup> Despite previously held beliefs that fathers were important to children only as economic providers and disciplinarians, evidence has shown that fathers play a unique and pivotal role in the overall development and well-being of children. Numerous studies show that increased father involvement is associated with improved cognitive, academic, psychological- emotional, and social- adaptive outcomes for children.<sup>ii</sup> In addition, father involvement has other positive effects on MCH outcomes. Father involvement increases the likelihood that a woman will receive prenatal care in her first trimester by 40 percent and reduces a pregnant woman's cigarette consumption by 36 percent.<sup>iii</sup> Expectant fathers can be influential advocates for breastfeeding by playing a critical role in encouraging a mother to breastfeed the newborn infant.<sup>iv</sup> Fathers who also accompanied the mother on a prenatal visit were more likely to engage in father-child activities later in the child's life.<sup>v</sup>

This issue brief explores the programmatic strategies that Title V programs are using to incorporate father involvement into MCH programs and outlines recommendations for improved service delivery in fatherhood programs.

There are numerous barriers to engaging fathers in MCH programs and services. For instance, cultural norms have dictated a broad disregard for the importance of father involvement during pregnancy.<sup>vi</sup> Most expectant fathers report difficulties taking time away from work or school in order to attend prenatal appointments and classes.<sup>vii</sup> Also, many existing public programs do not focus on the family as a whole and this can create and/or compound the barriers of prenatal paternal involvement.<sup>viii</sup>

In order to incorporate fathers during this important time in fetal development, MCH programs must aim to promote father engagement within family systems to support an atmosphere of paternal inclusion.<sup>ix</sup>

The Maternal and Child Health Bureau requires all state Title V programs to report on a core set of measures developed by each state to address their state priority needs.

Many states have adopted performance measures to incorporate male involvement in adolescent health; however, no state performance measures have been adopted to specifically address fatherhood involvement in maternal and child health populations.

### State Efforts

State Title V agencies are pursuing a variety of strategies to engage fathers in MCH activities. A brief environmental scan of state fatherhood activities, including a narrative search for 'fatherhood' in the Title V Information System (TVIS) showed that states are pursuing the following strategies to increase father involvement through agency capacity building and agency coordination and collaboration:

- Supporting state Fatherhood Initiatives to engage fathers in participation in their children's lives and encouraging fathers to actively support their partners in both preconception and interconception health.
- Promoting *The Responsible Fatherhood Program*, a five-year federal grant from the Department of Health and Human Services. Several *Responsible Fatherhood Programs* are partnering with state MCH agencies. Examples include:
  - Holding Parent-Run Evening Preschool -- Fathers (PREP-F) program, in which fathers and their children attend evening and weekend program activities led by the fathers under the instruction of parenting/child development specialists. Fathers learn positive, non-abusive parenting skills and the activities help them reconnect with their children.
  - Partnering with the Department of Family and Children Services' Child Support Enforcement Office to offer job placement, vocational training, counseling and the opportunity to earn a GED.

- Representing MCH Agencies by serving on various Fatherhood Coalitions and Fatherhood Advisory Councils.
- Partnering with Social and Rehabilitative Services to sponsor an Annual Statewide Fatherhood Summit to promote healthy father/male involvement in the lives of children.
- Building capacity for preventative and primary care for women by partnering with Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies (HMHB) Coalitions to provide formal and informal outreach worker training on various MCH related topics including fatherhood.
- Coordinating with the Office of the Attorney General to collaborate on family and fatherhood programs and initiatives.
- Enhancing state and local collaborations by supporting a Regional Fatherhood Conference and developing a curriculum for fathers.
- Developing and disseminating consumer and provider educational materials regarding the importance of men's health and the impact on maternal and child health.
- Collaborating with the Department of Justice and the Department of Social Services to educate adolescent fathers who pass through the judicial system. The four components include: 1) infant/toddler growth and development; 2) infant nutrition; 3) child safety and; 4) responsible fatherhood.
- Serving with various community agencies in planning mentoring programs for children of prison inmates to help maintain the family structure.
- Collaborating with the Department of Workforce Services to implement a program to support, educate and place fathers into higher paying jobs.
- View the prenatal period as a key moment for intervention- a time to identify the mother and father's risk factors and to intervene accordingly.
- Examine the ways in which prenatal fatherhood programs and family violence service providers can partner to achieve a shared goal of positive father involvement and overall family health and safety.
- Work with local prenatal care services and providers to advocate for father involvement during pregnancy.
- Develop educational materials and trainings for nurses, doctors, midwives and other health care professionals about the importance of including fathers during prenatal visits and provide sample materials and trainings.
- Rigorously evaluate program standards and results.<sup>xi</sup>

## Conclusion

Engaging fathers in MCH programs and services is an emerging issue. As promising practices and innovative approaches evolve, state Title V agencies can continue to partner with other state agencies and community organizations. Research shows that father involvement is important at every stage in the growth and development of a child. Targeting approaches to best engage fathers can improve maternal and birth outcomes and provide a valuable contribution in helping children and families to thrive.

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## Program Spotlight

While there are few resources targeting fathers in MCH, fatherhood involvement programs continue to emerge in states. In 2008, The Texas Office of the Attorney General produced a valuable resource following their sponsorship of the First National Conference of Emerging Research and Practice on Prenatal Father Involvement. This resource provides an overview of the national conference and outlines next steps and recommendations for paternal contributions to MCH. The following recommendations were outlined as a philosophical and programmatic framework for serving children, families and fathers prenatally.<sup>x</sup>

- Acknowledge the father is an important part of the family system and his contributions (or omissions) have a lasting impact on the overall welfare of the mother and child.
- Involve fathers in the lives of their children from the earliest moment possible. Ideally, every man will have a strong sense of his personal responsibility in the planning, conception, development and life of his child(ren).
- Promote a shift in public opinion about a father's positive involvement during his partner's pregnancy, to promote healthy concepts of manliness and fatherhood.
- Define the nature of fatherhood and what it is to be a loving father.

<sup>i</sup> Kreider, R. M. (2007). *Living Arrangements of Children: 2004*. Current Population Reports, 70-114. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>ii</sup> Moore, T., Kotelchuck, M. (2004). Predictors of Urban Fathers' Involvement in Their Child's Health Care. *Pediatrics*. 113, 574-580.

<sup>iii</sup> Martin, L., McNamara, M., Milot, A., Halle, T., Hair, E. (2007). The Effects of Father Involvement during Pregnancy on Receipt of Prenatal Care and Maternal Smoking. *Maternal Child Health Journal*, 11, 595-602.

<sup>iv</sup> Wolfberg, A., Michels, K., Shields, W., O'Campo, P., Bronner, Y., Bienstock, J. (2004) Dads as Breastfeeding Advocates: Results from a Randomized Controlled Trial of Educational Intervention. *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. 191(3), 708-12.

<sup>v</sup> Vogel, C., Boller, K., Faerber, J., Shannon, J., Tamis-LeMonda, C. (2003). *Understanding Fathering: The Early Head Start Study of Fathers of Newborns*. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. Available at: <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/earlycare/fatheroverview.asp>.

<sup>vi</sup> Office of Family Initiatives. Office of the Attorney General of Texas. (2008). *The First Nine Mothers of Fatherhood: Paternal Contributions to Maternal and Child Health Outcomes*. A Report of the Findings from the First National Conference of Emerging Research and Practice on Prenatal Father Involvement. Retrieved January 10, 2009, from [http://www.oag.state.tx.us/cs/publications\\_cs.shtml](http://www.oag.state.tx.us/cs/publications_cs.shtml).

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

<sup>x</sup> Ibid

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

