

Front Porch Series Broadcast Call Challenges and Opportunities in Engaging Fathers

Gail Joseph: Hello and good morning, or good afternoon, depending on which coast you're listening in from. This is Gail Joseph. I'm the co-director of the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, and I'm so pleased to welcome you to this month's Front Porch. As you know, if you've listened before, or if you're new to listening in, the Front Porch Series, we do this on a monthly basis, and we bring a leading expert in the field, a researcher, to talk about their work and how it applies to the good work that we do in Head Start programs. Whether that's around family engagement or whether that's around early childhood classroom practices, we hear something that can help us kind of think a little bit differently or how to do our work a little bit better or differently than we have in the past. And so today is no exception. We have an amazing speaker today who's going to talk about father engagement.

So I'm going to introduce our speaker today. We're very excited. We have Dr. Justin Dyer, who's an assistant professor at Brigham Young University. So Justin got his doctorate from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, which happens to be one of our partners at NCQTL, so we're very excited about that, and he received his doctorate in human development and family studies. And his research interests have really been focused on fatherhood, and in particular, fathers of children with special needs and incarcerated fathers, so fathers experiencing some type of stress in their environment, in their context. So we are delighted to hear from Dr. Dyer, and at this point I will turn it over to him.

Justin Dyer: Well, great. Thanks so much, Gail. I'm really, really pleased to be a part of this today. Gail and I were just talking about how nice it is for us who work in academia to get out a little bit more and talk to people who are actually doing this really, really great work. So I'm very pleased to be a part of this. And, yes, definitely ask questions. I'm going to be talking mostly about averages, what works for most people, but you don't work with averages, you work with real people. And there might be some things that you have questions about that don't maybe fit into what I'm going to present today, so please go ahead and ask those.

So this is entitled "Opportunities to Engage Fathers." Gail already gave a little introduction to me, and I'll just put this up here, the research areas that I have that Gail already mentioned, as well, I think, the very last point, I think it's important to note that I'm a father. I have five little kids, and just for my own sake, I get to see them, for me to see them, here they are. There's four, my four oldest, and then I have one little girl just born two months ago. And I was excited when I heard that this was going to focus on age 0-5, because I happen to have three kids in that age range, so I get a lot of practice with this age group. So I'm really pleased to be talking about this today.

So starting to talk about fathers and their kids, and one of the first points that I'd like to make is that fathers' involvement and their warmth benefit children on almost anything that you can think of. Almost any measure that we throw at father involvement, father warmth, we see that kids do better when fathers are involved. They do better socially, they do better emotionally, they do better cognitively, academically, they do better in their self-regulation, their self-esteem. And so the more that we can find ways to have fathers involved in their children's lives, the better they're going to do. And so this time today that we're going to spend together talking about this, I hope that it prompts

some ideas for each one of you in what you can do. And I'm such a believer, that, in your abilities to engage fathers. Most fathers know that they need to be involved, want to be involved. They just need some help to get to that point. And so hopefully today we can give some ideas about getting to that point.

I took this from the Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide. So how does Head Start think about fathers? And this part says, "Head Start has a long history of acknowledging that male family members and father figures are important contributors to the school readiness of children and to the well being of families." And I actually like that last part as well, because this extends beyond just the children. When fathers are engaged in their children's lives, the mothers also benefit. And I might talk a little bit more about that later in relation to children with disabilities.

The next point I'd like to make is that early intervention with fathers is crucial. Early father involvement leads to later father involvement. On any given day, the best indicator of how involved a father is is how involved he was the day before. So when we get fathers involved, they tend to stay involved. But if we don't involve fathers initially, they tend to not be involved later on. And it's important to know that early involvement in the home, so involvement in feeding the child, dressing the child, changing diapers, that that seems to translate into later involvement in the school. So when you get fathers involved in any area, it seems to have a ripple effect and the fathers get involved in other areas of their children's lives as well. So we did a study where we looked at – I have my little laser pointer here. We looked at early home involvement on the kinds of things I mentioned, whether it's child care, monitoring, those kinds of things. That early home involvement translated into schoolspecific involvement later on, whether it was meeting with a teacher, volunteering in the school, those kinds of activities where they were engaged, right, with the school. And then that then led to child school success. So that early home involvement, it was interesting, usually didn't have a direct influence on the child school success, but the early home involvement did have an impact because it created those ripples throughout the other areas of the child's life.

So I want to give just a brief overview of father involvement in today's world. This is going to help set the stage for how we then engage with fathers. And I want to say father involvement is the best of times right now. We now have new social expectations that allow fathers to be more involved than ever. Fathers are now – it's okay for them to change diapers and feed their children. I was talking with my grandmother at one point, and she mentioned that – I happened to have been changing my child's diaper, and she said to me, she said, "I would have never even thought to ask my husband to change a diaper," that that wouldn't have even entered into her head to ask him to change a diaper. So we now have these great new social expectations that allow fathers to be more involved than ever. And also fathers express interest in being involved in, specifically, Head Start and other programs. So fathers do get more engaged, but also they're expressing that they want to be involved in Head Start and other programs.

Just to kind of give you an overview, a historical view, of father involvement over time – this slide looks a little busy – but really all it is, is here we have fathers' hours per week they spend in child care. And this is across several different countries. So here we have U.S. fathers, and in 1965, they spent about 2.5 hours in child care. But then what you'll see, and I'll track it here with this red line, that that stayed pretty steady until about '85, and then it just exploded to now U.S. fathers spend about seven hours in

child care. So it's there, it's in the culture now, and across cultures that fathers can spend more time with their kids. So today fathers have far more opportunities and it's far more socially acceptable for them to be engaged with their kids. At the same time, this also may be the worst of times for father involvement, somewhat paradoxically. So for example, in 2009, the census found that 23 percent of children were living without a father, and that's any father figure that was reported. So 23 percent of kids were living without a father just in that given year. And of course the lifetime over the child's – the time the child is a child, about 50 percent of kids spend some time without a father. And of course in many areas in the United States, that's far higher, and particularly when you're dealing with, say, Head Start population, populations of lower income, that's much, much higher. And just to give you a graph of over time, this starts back in the 1880s, and this is mother-only households. So fewer than 10 percent in the 1880s had a mother only. Decreased a little bit through the '30s, and then of course you have this large expansion of the number of homes without a father present. So at the same time we have these great opportunities for fathers to be involved, we also have fewer and fewer fathers actually taking those opportunities that's presented to them.

Now, in this context, I want to bring up the issue of fathers that might be problems for their children. Some fathers' problem behaviors can lead to problems for the child, and we're all familiar with this. I study incarcerated fathers. I'm very familiar with the idea that some fathers may cause problems, to say the least, for the children, for the mother of their children. And of course, child specialists need to be aware of these potential issues and help to minimize those problems as much as possible. However, I do want to add a caveat that we need to be careful when we think about perhaps excluding a father from engagement in the child's life. In the majority of cases, children do better with their father involved. We see that they do better on a lot of those indexes mentioned earlier, whether it's socially, emotionally, cognitively. For example, we did one study where we looked at what happened to kids when their father was incarcerated. Now, these fathers are by definition doing something illegal, they're doing something bad, and sometimes the assumption is, well, it's probably better off for the child not to have the father there; the child will actually do better when the father is incarcerated. We found that to be the case in only 6 percent of those children. So in only about 6 percent of the children did we see that they did better when their father was incarcerated. In the majority of cases, or I should say in a large percentage of those cases, the fathers – the children did much worse when the fathers were incarcerated. So even fathers that we might say are "bad fathers," quote-unquote, have something to contribute to their children. And we need to be very careful when we're deciding to exclude a father from it. We need to make sure that, yes, indeed, this is a father that shouldn't be involved in the child's life. But we need to be very careful when we do that.

So with that kind of overview of fatherhood, let's start talking specifically about how we partner with fathers in child programs. And we often think about this in terms of overlapping spheres, where we have mother, father, the child specialist in their own spheres, and then the overlap of the spheres is where we're sharing knowledge, ideas about the children, and where a lot of good things can happen because everybody gets on the same page about the child. And so what we like to think about is how do we bring those spheres together where then we create partnership? And in that middle where you have fathers, mothers, child specialists all together, we have that partnership that can create a lot of wonderful things for the child. And just speaking of father-school partnerships, the more fathers – we've found the more fathers are involved in school programs, the more effective their involvement becomes. So they start to improve in their engagement with the partnership programs the more they are engaged. So it may be a slow start to begin with, but as we engage more with them, the more

effective that engagement becomes. I also want to make the point, and this alludes to a point made earlier and will probably come up again, that when we engage fathers in school partnerships, this builds fathers' connections to the family. So they're engaged in the school; that helps out the caregiver, the mother of the child, and that builds their connections. So you see the overlap between mother and father starting to increase, which is really important, and then it also builds connections to the community where the father starts caring about the school and what's going on with the school and other community resources. That a lot of these fathers who come from low-income areas have very tenuous relationships with both family and community. So if what we can do is start to engage them in the school, reaching out to them, that's also going to help connect them to the family, it's going to help them connect to the community. So it's far more, when we talk about partnering with fathers, it's far more than simply getting involved in that particular activity; gluing something with his child, helping the child make a project actually helps connect them with much more than just that.

Now, just to say something about the importance of partnerships, that when we have those partnerships, we start to have shared goals and we see a shared vision together, which makes us far more effective if we can all agree on where we're going. Shared strategies to obtain those goals. Often we'll have the same goals, but people have different strategies about how they go about and meet those goals. So they share those strategies and they share information about the child. By sharing information, parents and child specialists can better tailor a child's experience, whether that be their home experience, whether that be the experience in the classroom. It's so important that we can acknowledge that mothers have information about the child that the child specialist doesn't, the child specialist has information about the child that the mother and the father don't, and the father even has information that he could contribute to that. So you get various perspectives on the child, making for a much better environment, tailoring the environment to be able to best meet the needs of the child.

Here's another quote from the Head Start Father Engagement programming guide, and I like how this emphasizes those partnerships. So father engagement means making a commitment to a partnership. Engagement is rooted in positive relationships. There is a focus on creating and sustaining ongoing relationships, okay? And these relationships are really critical for fathers who may not feel like the school setting is for them. Or it may come from a place, a cultural background where fathers maybe don't have the same kinds of roles in their children's lives, and so having a relationship with a father that's ongoing, that's not just a single phone call to try and get him involved, but that builds upon something where we can trust one another and help them feel comfortable with the child specialist and build from there. And then of course the last part here, the intent is to support families to benefit children's learning and development.

So how do we increase this overlap between fathers, mothers, and the child specialists? First point I'd like to make is to treat the fathers as knowledgeable and capable. Sometimes fathers are treated like they don't know anything about – don't know anything about children, and they sense that and they will back away. This is taking a strength-based approach: what can they give, what do they have that they can provide for the child? We need to consider also what's possible with the fathers rather than what's ideal. We often have this idea of, well, this is the ideal, this is what we want them to be doing, and that's what we push for. We need to take each father where they're at and understand what they can do and work with that, and that then will help to expand the father's possibilities of what he can

do. Also in this, consider the goals of the father. What is the goal that the father has in his child's schooling? Try and come together to understand that. Now, I've got to say that sometimes when we think about increasing the overlap between mothers and fathers, as child specialists, we think, well, in order to increase overlap, we just need to get them to think like us. How do we – what do we think is best for the child? But the overlap does go both ways, and us trying to understand what goals the parents have and then coming together on that.

Also about this is how do we define success? I like this quote from research that essentially summarizes the scholarship out there on fathers, and it says, "No single definition of 'successful father' and no ideal 'father's role' can claim universal acceptance or empirical support." So what we can – what we need to do is we need to look at the ways that they can be successful and build on those and don't think that we have to have a cookie-cutter... cookie-cutter method for everybody, that one way works for everybody. Sometimes when we try and create these partnerships, we may leave the father behind, where the child care specialist comes in and creates a partnership with the mother, but the father may be actually left out of that process. And what we want to do is we want to help open the door to the father. Sometimes it may be easier for the child specialist just to work with the mother. It certainly is. It's harder just to get a father onboard. And so sometimes we may just leave behind the father and not get him engaged just because it's easier to have the mother, just the mother involved and not bring in the father. But something we have to remember is that the relationship between the mother and the father will last far longer than the relationship between the mother and the child specialist. And it may be that one of the major goals of the child specialist is to help the mother and the father to come together, to help them create an overlap that will last far longer than the overlap will last between, say, the mother and the child specialist. So the child specialist may actively push the father out, and that might be because of beliefs about fathers, whether or not they can actually be helpful. It might also be a belief about a particular father: "Oh, that father doesn't seem very capable, so we're just going to leave the father out of it." The child specialist may also inadvertently push the father out by, say, not consulting the father, perhaps being condescending or critical about the father. None of you would ever do that, but we might be overly critical. By ignoring the father: if the fathers aren't actively engaged, they will probably assume that, "Well, that just must be the mother's sphere and so I'm not going to be involved, and so I'm going to disengage." We need to help mothers also open the door to fathers. Moms can be encouraged to express confidence in the father, not make fun of the father, which can happen sometimes when a father's trying to change a diaper or trying to do something with a child that they're not doing quite right. Men are pretty sensitive to those kinds of things. We need to help the mom help the father feel successful in his role as a father.

Okay, so as we're talking about creating overlap, opening the door to fathers, what are some potential barriers to that? And we did a study of 551 providers of early intervention, right? So these are people who are actually going out and helping families of children with disabilities. And we interviewed them about potential barriers, the barriers that they saw to engaging with the father of the family. The first one was father's work schedule, and this is a quote from one of the providers, it says providers do not – they don't have late work hours, as well as the service coordinators. So they don't – their schedules don't match up with the fathers' schedule. And so we need to be as flexible as we possibly can. If our work hours can't be more flexible, how can we get the father engaged, whether through email, whether it's when does he have a break from work, can we engage him during that time?

This is also – this next issue is related to this, in thinking of how do we creatively engage fathers, that a lot of these fathers aren't resident with the child, and there might be some custody issues there. So this provider said we sometimes get referrals where fathers live a few hours away from their child. This makes it hard, to say the least, if they live hours away, for them to make it to the meetings. Can we use Skype; are there other methods that we can use in order to get fathers participating in meetings, getting updates, and also soliciting some feedback from the father, asking the father what they think their child needs. Another one is about father's beliefs about what they can do or what they're good at doing. Some fathers don't believe that they're very good at engaging with a child, a child that has special needs, for example. And us helping to increase their confidence in that is actually critical.

Another one that came up as a barrier to engaging fathers was that services were almost always focused on the mother, that they were the initial point of contact and that then there was never a move towards working with the father. For example, this one said services – this provider said services are geared toward mothers, so fathers don't feel as welcome to participate. Maybe during one of the meetings, there's only mothers there and there's no other fathers there. Maybe it's all female; there's no male staff there. It can make a father feel awkward when he comes into a meeting and he is the only male sitting in the room. Others – another one said, "I have some fathers who seem uncomfortable working with me since I am a woman in their home." And fathers might feel uncomfortable about that. And how do we work with them to help them feel that they are part of this and maybe acknowledging that it might be a little awkward, but helping them to feel comfortable with the provider.

So how do we begin these partnerships? We've talked about why we want to have overlap, how we increase that, some general principles about barriers, and now let's talk about if we were to begin a father-school partnership program, how would we do that? The first is to formulate a clear rationale for everybody, for the staff, everybody involved. Why do you want to get fathers engaged? Hopefully at the beginning of this webinar I was able to explain some reasons why you'd want to get fathers engaged, but people need to understand that.

The second part in creating a program is to acknowledge that there will be resistance. Anytime there's change, there's going to be resistance. There's going to be resistance maybe from the staff or administrators, resistance from the mothers, resistance from the fathers themselves. That resistance doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It's actually just a natural part of creating a new program. So when you encounter resistance, think, "That's great," because this is just a natural part. If you don't have any resistance to it when you start a program, people probably aren't actually enacting the program. They're probably not actually doing it. They say everything's going great, there's no problems, everybody's onboard. Resistance is a natural part of it, so don't be hesitant when you have resistance or think that things aren't going right. It's just a natural part of the process.

Also, clearly specify the targets. In other words, who is a father that we're going to try and engage? Is it any male who's involved in the child's life? Sometimes we only engage, say, biological fathers or fathers that actually have custody over the child, and that might narrow too much the focus, and we may need to think a little more broadly about the fathers that we want to engage.

Also, don't reinvent the wheel. To the extent possible, use existing programs that include family-school partnerships. You don't need to – if you already have a program that's engaging mothers well, well, just inserting the father into those processes might be exactly what you need. Again, the Head Start program – Head Start has a program, that program guide, that can be used. So we don't need to create something from scratch. Use the existing resources that you already have.

Also, involve mothers in developing these initiatives. What do the mothers think about it? We don't want to just start including fathers when we haven't got the mothers onboard as well. How can we help include the mothers as we start to build these initiatives? Also, we then still do need to continue to meet the mothers' needs. Now, in some ways, this can sound like, well, you need to do everything without any more resources, and that can be hard. You need to do all these other things but also make sure you keep doing what you're doing. An important point here is that when we engage fathers and when fathers come along, the needs of the mothers are often met even better. So it's not an either/or in many cases. What it is, is that when we engage the father, then the father becomes an ally with the mother in this. And so we're actually going to be better meeting mothers' needs when we engage the father.

We need to acknowledge that diversity of family structure. Working with incarcerated fathers in particular, those family structures can be very complex and very hard to sort through. And sometimes we can even perhaps get a little put off, if you will, by some family structures. We need to acknowledge that there are those family structures, take people where they're at, and say, "How can we build on what they already have?" And also proceed at the pace of the fathers. Give the fathers options to be involved. "Do you want to help with this with the child? Do you want to help with that with the child? What would be best for you?" Have reasonable expectations for them and build upon successes. Again, when the father has some success, praise that success and help him to feel that he can actually be engaged with these kids. Provide training for your staff. Often staff have little formalized education in involving fathers. And it may simply be that you have, in a weekly meeting, a two-minute training where you say, "Did anybody try and engage a father this week? Did anybody have any success?" You have somebody tell their experience, describe what they did, and brainstorm for a minute about why that was good, maybe what could be done better. It doesn't have to be major. It can just be these little moments where we're thinking about it, where it's on people's minds.

And finally, evaluate your progress. This is an important point, the last: you get what you measure. When you start measuring the number of contacts you have with fathers, how much you're engaging fathers, that often spurs more of that. In fact, often it doesn't take any more than simply having people report that that starts getting them more engaged to that, because they have to think about it regularly.

And these ideas for building these father-school partnerships come from a study done by Brent McBride, myself, and Tom Rane. So this is a point that I want to make here close to the end that's come up again and again here, and I just want to hit it home, that we need to help fathers feel successful at what they do. People tend to stop doing what they don't feel successful at. If they don't feel successful at something, they'll stop doing it. If fathers don't feel successful at family life, if mothers don't feel successful at family life, they're going to stop doing it. They're going to abandon it. And of course I see that all the time when I work with fathers who are in pretty serious trouble. We

need to help find ways to get fathers to feel like they're being a good dad. Find those small successes - yet again I'm pointing this out – and point out what they're doing right, and, again, 0-5 is a critical time to do this. Again, think about that this is going to set the stage for his involvement later on in the child's life. You may be the only person who has the opportunity to set the father on a lifelong path of positive involvement.

Okay, now I want to finish up, just speak to the two specific areas of children with disabilities and incarceration, some of my areas of interest. And just a first note, child specialists play a vital role in helping parents create a warm atmosphere, a warm home atmosphere in which the child can flourish. When a child has a disability, parents often have increased stress and increased confusion about what to do. The role of the child specialist is absolutely indispensable in helping parents to understand what's going on with their child. It's really, really important that the parents can understand the diagnosis. It's interesting, in some research we did, we found that when children struggled developmentally, the fathers tended to back off. However, when a child received a diagnosis, the father tended – the father involvement tended to increase. So when they started to understand what was going on, the fathers began to be more engaged.

Now, I'm going to use an example of my son. He's 4 years old, and 4-year-olds can be obviously quite the handful and somewhat frustrating. And I learned recently that he was really diagnosed with a serious case of being 4 years old. So I was at a birthday party for my grandmother, and my 4-year-old boy was there along with the daughter of my cousin, who's also 4 years old, so the exact same age. And both this 4-year-old little girl and my 4-year-old boy, they went to go get cake. And they were coming back from getting their cake, and both of them simultaneously dropped their cake on the floor. I mean, it was like Olympic simultaneous. It was amazing. And in that moment, you know, you feel frustration because there's cake on the floor, but it also felt some relief to think, oh, what my boy is doing is totally normal for a 4-year-old, right? And that immediately helps us to decrease our stress, decrease our anxiety, knowing that what the child is doing is pretty much normal within their context. And that can really help parents out, decrease their frustration. Some basic understanding of development, and particularly for children with developmental delays, can be defining for these parents.

Finally, incarcerated fathers. There are a lot of these, unfortunately. If you just take all men who are age 18 and older, there are 1 in 106 who are incarcerated, and this is very easy math to calculate this. There's nothing magic going on here. It's simply seeing how many men are age 18 and over and dividing it by the number of men who are incarcerated. Oh, and this is white men. I'm sorry, this is specifically white men in the first one. The second one is all men, 1 in 54. For Hispanic men, 1 in 36. Black men ages 18 or older, 1 in 15. And strikingly, age 20-34, 1 in 9 black men are incarcerated. This comes from numbers done by the Pew Center and just really gets at the number of people that are affected by incarceration.

And so some tips in working with families and mothers when a father's incarcerated. Be a concerned ally of the mother and the child. Don't impose your own agenda on what you think that they should be doing. You can give helpful ideas, but mostly see what you can do about empathizing with them and seeing where they want to go with the relationship with the father. If the family desires to have a continued relationship with the father, help them to create a sense of family with the father. For

example, one time somebody in my church group, the father was incarcerated for a time, and I would go visit him regularly. And one of the things I was able to do was help him with birthdays. So what he would do is he would tell me what he wanted to get for his kids for their birthdays, I'd go out, get it, wrap it, and then those presents would be from dad. How do we create a sense of family with the incarcerated father? And that then tends to lead to much better integration after he's released. With the mother, help the child – with the mother as an ally, help the child understand as much as possible about it. Sometimes the truth is hidden from a child. We see that that's often a problem. They tell the child that the father is away fighting in Afghanistan or he's a soldier somewhere when in reality he's incarcerated. That can in some ways seem nice to the child, but guess what, the child probably will find out at some time, whether later or some child at school is going to say that "Oh, I know that your dad's in prison," and that can be a really big problem, obviously. So help the child understand as much as they can handle. You don't need to share all the information about the father, obviously, but sensitively help them understand as much as they can.

And help them to normalize the experience. This is an interesting one. If you know, "Sesame Street" recently, they have a little piece about a Muppet whose father is incarcerated, and they work through that. Somebody comes and helps them to talk through that. If you just type in "Sesame Street" and "father in prison," you'll come up with that. "Reading Rainbow," if you're familiar with "Reading Rainbow," they also did a whole episode on incarcerated fathers. There's children's books out there on children with incarcerated fathers. So these can actually help to normalize the experience. Sometimes we don't feel like we want to normalize it, we don't think it should be normal – indeed, it shouldn't - but we want to help the child feel like what they're feeling is normal in this situation and that they can handle it.

Finally, just some important resources. We have the Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide and also the Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Incarcerated – with, sorry, not incarcerated fathers – Relationships with Families. Both of these are really great resources that you can refer to. Just here some references at the end of some of the studies I cited throughout. And that's it. I just really want to thank you for this opportunity. And I'll turn it back to Gail.

Gail: All right, thank you so much. That was – that was amazing. First of all, you are so incredibly easy to listen to. That was lovely. And just packed with great – both just kind of rich kind of research around this area, but then you gave us some nice practical strategies that we can take back to programs, which is fantastic. And we know you are so busy doing this good work, and we just are so appreciative that you took some time out to present your research and your passion around fatherhood involvement with us today. So thank you, and I hope that all of our listeners have a great day.

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