

Lifting Up Dads

ENCOURAGING FATHERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS

by Adam Robson

My first day as a preschool dad started out pretty much as expected.

I was more anxious than my three-year-old son — or else he was doing much better than his dad at hiding his first-day jitters. Jake [not his real name] was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, his blond curls coiffed perfectly for the pictures his mom took to commemorate the occasion. I did my best to present myself as I supposed a respectable preschool dad should, but my uncertainty about what that looked like just increased my nervousness. What would the moms think? Would my son be the only kid there with his dad?

It's not as if we weren't well prepared for this moment. His teachers had invited us to tour the classroom a few weeks before the start of the school year. They'd visited us at home too, which thrilled my son — so much that he was bouncing on the furniture — but admittedly did nothing to relieve my start-of-school anxiety. His teachers were great. They encouraged me to spend time in the classroom with my



Having fathers involved in preschool education benefits boys, girls, dads, and moms alike.

son and attend the upcoming field trip to the apple orchard. Jake was excited about school. What was there to worry about?

I think, most of all, I was afraid I'd be the only dad dropping off his child, feeling awkward and out-of-place. I wasn't worried about my son — he'd be just fine. I was worried about myself.

We arrived at the preschool, and after exchanging smiles with the teachers, my son and I settled into a book he chose from the array on the circle rug. It was only then, with my son on my lap and a book shared between us, trans-

ported to a familiar comfort zone, that I had a chance to survey the room and take in my surroundings.

I expected the shelves of neatly organized materials, the little chairs and little tables, the play ovens and dress-up clothes. I expected the warmth and the chatter and the nervous getting-to-know-you stuff.

What I didn't expect to see was other dads. Even though the teachers had done their best to assure me that HighScope's Demonstration Preschool included all kinds of family configurations, I was more than a little surprised that males were so well represented. In fact, it was a fairly even mix of moms, dads, siblings, and grandparents. There was even one teenager, a boy.

HighScope's Demonstration Preschool does a lot to encourage parental participation and engage diverse families, and the teachers make a special effort to reach out to dads. The HighScope Preschool Curriculum emphasizes the benefits of parental involvement to children's "overall development and success" in school. So it was just a mat-

ter of days before I felt at home in my son's preschool classroom, and the daily routine became, well, routine.

For a lot of dads, that doesn't happen so easily. Many more never see the inside of their child's classroom. One in three children — over 24 million in total — lives in a home without their father present (US Census Bureau, 2016). The growing number of non-resident fathers is not the only barrier to father engagement in early childhood programs. Some dads may have a history of distrust with social service agencies and schools, or may be defensive about problems with substance abuse or a criminal history, preventing them from playing an active role in their child's



Studies show that children whose dads take an active role in their education tend to outperform those who don't have positive male role models.

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upbringing (Kendall & Pilnik, 2010). Others feel that they have "failed" as providers for their family, and have nothing else to offer their children (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2014). Still others don't see parenting as their responsibility (Scourfield, 2014). The fact is, while some children have the chance to benefit from a dad who's

actively involved in the early childhood environment, many more do not.

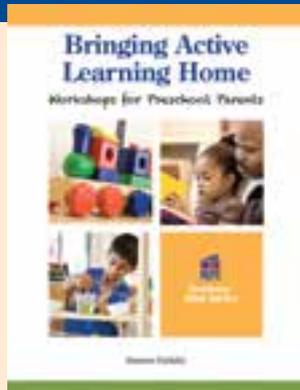
"Many fathers go to work and don't have the luxury of spending time in the classroom," said Kenneth Sherman, a preschool teacher and HighScope trainer. "Another reason there aren't a lot of males in the classroom is because of the stigma attached to taking on that traditional female role. Dads are not considered the natural, typical caregivers. So when we think about males in the classroom — fathers and father figures — I think a lot of times they're viewed as a substitute for the natural caregiver, mom."

Though the stigma attached to dads who play an active role in their young children's education has diminished, many dads, says Sherman — especially those who may not have had the advantage of an active role played by their

own father — feel a lingering discomfort in an early childhood environment. That's understandable, he continues, but it's important that the inheritance of this generation of boys and girls includes an understanding that the early education environment is a place for everyone. Having other male role models in the classroom is "another way of letting boys know, 'Hey, this is not just a place for girls, but for boys too,'" says Sherman. "When people see someone who looks like them, that can be very comforting. When they don't, that can cause a lot of discomfort. Children are people too, and need that reassurance," he adds.

That was certainly true for me. When my son entered preschool, I was relieved that I wasn't the only dad in the room. And once I got over my own discomfort, I realized that, by being present and interacting with the group, I was having a positive impact on the entire class. It wasn't long before other children were sitting on my lap and reading books with my son and me. For children whose fathers weren't or couldn't be there, my consistent participation and interaction helped to normalize the presence of men in their classroom.

Increasingly, the early childhood field is recognizing the importance of fathers in their children's classroom. Among the Professional Development goals prioritized by Head Start's Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework is a focus on developing "unique ways to engage fathers." Moreover, early childhood professionals in general are promoting a greater awareness of the important, even essential, role fathers play in their child's development and early education, and how that formative influence plays out in the child's continued development. The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, a resource funded by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), showcases some impressive research that's been done over the last decade in support of their mission to "encourage and strengthen fathers and families" (fatherhood.gov). Preschoolers whose



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fathers are actively involved in their education tend to have better attitudes about school and better academic performance; they also make friends more

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easily and exhibit fewer antisocial or delinquent behaviors (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005).

The results of these studies are not all that startling. One would expect that parents — both moms and dads — who

Having dads in the classroom will benefit not only their own children but the entire class.

show greater interest in their child’s education could anticipate more positive outcomes.

That’s why Terrence, whose daughter attends the Demonstration Preschool, decided to make the sacrifices necessary in order to take an active role in his daughter’s education. Terrence says he’s learning as much as his child about how to navigate the early childhood environment. One of the things he’s learned is that his presence in the classroom can have a positive impact on not just his daughter, but the other children as well. At first, Terrence approached dropoff and pickup time with trepidation. “But those kids, they gravitate to me now,” he says. “A lot of it is familiarity, because they see me every day, so they get comfortable talking to me, or to other parents, and they don’t see me as a stranger anymore, but somebody’s dad instead.”

The simple act of showing up and being a part of the classroom, even if only for a few minutes, changes preconceptions about what preschool — and education — is. For families who haven’t had positive experiences with the educational system, that’s an important step in building trusting relationships — the foundation of family engagement.

Rob, another preschool dad, admits that the stigma he felt about being a preschool dad was self-imposed. “I always thought that other parents would look down on me because I’ve taken more of a stay-at-home-dad role,” he says. “But everyone has seen me as the dad who wants to be involved. And that’s been



huge for me to kind of come out of my shell and comfort zone — just being the dad who shows up and becomes more involved with the other kids in the class.”

Overcoming the associations that persist in our culture about men who are openly caring toward children is one of the challenges of bringing more dads and granddads into the classroom. Thankfully, teachers and caregivers are positioned to do just that. And you’ll find that even planning one event or following one strategy with a focus on engaging dads can have a ripple effect that keeps them coming back for more.

Make Men More Visible

Start by making men more visible in your classroom. If that sounds like begging the question, you can use photographs as well. “Pictures are always great,” says Sherman. “Pictures of men

involved in classroom activities are a positive thing for all children to see when they’re playing. They can look up and see Jimmy and his dad playing too, and that can start a conversation.” In addition to posting pictures in the classroom of moms and dads actively learning with their children, include a family album for the children and other parents to look through during dropoff time. Better yet, put a dad who is interested in volunteering in charge of the project of collecting photographs and creating the album. The more visible men are in your program, the stronger the signal to the other men that being involved is not only okay but encouraged.

Actively Encourage Dads

Dads don’t often go out of their way to ask for assistance, and it helps sometimes to listen to what they’re *not* saying. Sometimes that little extra push is all it

takes, so making that extra effort to actively encourage dads is important.

“There was a dad of one of the girls in our classroom who was uncomfortable sitting on the floor and reading to her,” recounts Sherman. “This father

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had the ability and the time to read, but it occurred to me that he needed someone to make a conscious effort to tell him that it was OK.” Sherman handed the father one of his daughter’s favorite books. “That conscious effort broke the ice,” says Sherman, “because after that little bit of encouragement, he did want to be more involved and he did want to read to his daughter, even if it was only a couple of pages. And for his daughter, who saw other parents reading to their kids, that bonding experience with her own dad was important.”

Plan Events With Dads in Mind

When I took my son to Art Night at the Demonstration Preschool, there were a variety of activities for children to enjoy with their parents, and it was clear that the teachers had designed stations with the interest of the children and families in mind. For my son and the other children, it was a chance to share time with their parents and grandparents while making art. But for the adults in the group, it was more than a fun event. It was a chance for the parents — and especially the dads, who might not participate in the daily routine during the school day — to see how other moms and dads interacted with the children. When parents start seeing how other adults are involved, says Sherman, it will often inspire parents to participate more in the classroom themselves. “A lot of times parents don’t know that it’s okay for them to join, or aren’t necessarily comfortable joining even when it’s encouraged,” he says.

Teachers need to remind fathers that their presence in the classroom and at events is welcomed and appreciated.





Finding roles for men that promote their own strengths as a vital part of the early childhood classroom is an important step in achieving family partnerships that include all parents.

The woodworking station on Art Night, I observed, was especially popular with fathers and sons and daughters. I myself am more of a finger painter, and I was free to enjoy that activity with my own two-year-old daughter and some of the other children while my son got help hammering from another dad. That kind of investment from families in building a true classroom community is critical to a child's early education — and it made all the difference at Art Night for those children whose fathers weren't there.

That's not to say that moms and grandmas can't do the hammering and heavy lifting — they traditionally have in early childhood classrooms. But finding roles for men that promote their own strengths as a vital part of the early childhood classroom is an important step in achieving family partnerships that include all parents. "One of the things I've found most gratifying about being involved in my son's preschool classroom is that he's not the only one who benefits from dads like me being there," said Rob. "The other kids like me being there too. When we went to the apple orchard for a field trip, I lifted kids to reach apples high in the trees,

and it was really special to see how their faces lit up when they got that apple at the very top," he said.

Even something as simple as that — lifting kids up — lifts dads up too. Whether it's on a field trip, in the classroom, or just at an after-school event, involving fathers at the preschool level has been shown to benefit kids and dads and moms alike, in the classroom and beyond. For early childhood educators,

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the task at hand is to work on normalizing those roles: helping dads like me and Terrence and Rob to realize that taking on a nurturing role is not a sign of weakness, as society may lead us to believe, but a symbol of a strong father who's fully invested in his child and their future. ■

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