



Vital Topics for Staff to Discuss with Moms to Increase Dad's Involvement



**National
Fatherhood
Initiative®**

BECAUSE EVERY CHILD DESERVES A 24/7 DADSM

About the Author

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Chris has played a critical role in shaping NFI's focus as the leading provider of fatherhood skill-building resources in the country and the leading trainer of practitioners seeking to offer fatherhood programs in their communities. In his long tenure with NFI, he has been the organization's foremost developer of its world-class fatherhood programs. Brown has authored or co-authored flagship NFI programs such as 24/7 Dad® and InsideOut Dad®, and its more recent, innovative programs such as Understanding Dad™ and ProFathering15™. He has also authored many workshops, brochures, pocket guides, and other skill-building materials.

An applied anthropologist and author of several journal articles and book chapters on issues related to child health and well-being, he has studied masculinity cross culturally, especially as it applies to fatherhood and men's health and well-being. He has appeared as a fatherhood expert in media outlets, including the L.A. Times, New York Times, Nick Jr. Magazine, and CNN.



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Introduction

Do you wonder how to convince a mother to encourage the father of her child to be more involved in that child's life? Have you tried to convince a mother to allow the father of her child to be more involved only to be thwarted in your attempt? Do you work with a mother who can't seem to say one nice thing about the father of their children? Do you work with a couple that continually fights and has poor communication and conflict-resolution skills? Do you ever wonder why a certain couple can't seem to put their children first—who think about no one other than themselves?



These are the kinds of questions asked by many staff and practitioners who work with mothers, fathers, and families that we've worked with through the years. Staff and practitioners often ask us, "What do you have for mothers? Do you have any resources that can help us improve the relationships between mothers and fathers?" Well, yes, we do! And this guide is the latest in National Fatherhood Initiative's growing line of those resources that include the **Understanding Dad™** program (Visit www.fathersource.org for more information on these resources.)

How to Use This Guide

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) developed this guide to help staff in organizations that provide direct services to families and other individuals and practitioners (e.g. volunteers, coaches, and counselors) address the most critical issues in improving mother-father relationships. It is especially helpful for working with custodial mothers who do not live with the father of their children (i.e. he is non-residential and non-custodial), but it is helpful regardless of couples' romantic status and living arrangements.

Use this guide to design lectures, workshops, seminars, events, and other activities for mothers that cover one or more of the topics addressed in the following pages. While the guide addresses working with mothers one on one, you can apply the content to working with mothers in small and large-group settings. The content focuses on what moms can control in the relationship with the father of their children. As you review and decide how to apply the content, keep the following things in mind.

- There might be situations in which you should not encourage a mother to involve the father. These include situations in which the father is a legitimate threat or danger to the mother or children (e.g. he has a history of inflicting emotional or physical abuse).
- Some mother-father relationships are irreparable. No matter how hard you try to convince a mother to encourage father involvement, there are some relationships that are so far gone that it isn't possible to bring them back to a place in which the mother will encourage the father's involvement.



- Some mothers will be very hostile toward the father, and vice versa. It might take a while to help a mother move to a place in which she is receptive to his involvement.
- Keep mothers focused on the impact on her children of the relationship between her and the father. Doing so will give you the best chance of moving a mother to a place in which she will encourage the father's involvement.

We have identified 14 issues (hereafter referred to as topics) that are critical to address when assisting mothers of any race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background to improve the relationship with the father of their children. How did we identify them? Two primary ways: 1) discussions with staff and practitioners that work with mothers, fathers, and families during our more than 20 years providing programs, resources, training, and technical assistance, and 2) the results of a survey of more than 350 staff and practitioners we conducted in December 2014 in which we asked them to identify the most critical topics to address in helping mothers encourage father involvement in the lives of children.

The guide covers each topic in two to four pages. You will find background information on the topic, which includes several important factors to keep in mind when working with mothers on the topic. The background information is followed by key learning objectives for mothers that you should build into the type of learning format you decide to use. Questions that mothers should ask themselves on the topic—that you could also build into your learning format—follow and are tied into the key learning objectives. Many of the topics end with a list of one or more NFI resources you can use with mothers to deepen their learning on the topic.

Who We Are

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) was founded in 1994 to stimulate a society-wide movement to confront the most consequential social trend of our time: widespread fatherlessness in our nation. Our mission is simple yet ambitious: We seek to increase father involvement by equipping communities and human service organizations with the father-engagement training, programs, and resources they need to be father-inclusive.

Our 3E Strategy

NFI works to accomplish its mission with a focus on the following “3E” strategy.

EDUCATE

We educate and inspire all Americans, especially fathers, through public awareness campaigns, research, and other resources. We educate Americans on the consequences of father absence, the positive impact of involved fathers on children, and the importance of promoting involved, responsible, and committed fatherhood. We have generated hundreds of millions of dollars across the country in donated television, radio, print, and the Internet advertising. Our campaigns focus on the unique and irreplaceable contributions that fathers make in the lives of their children, and that as a nation, we must do more to encourage and support men to be good and responsible fathers. We produce *Father Facts*, now in its 9th edition, which is the definitive source of data on the consequences of father absence and the

benefits of father involvement. We conduct original, cutting-edge surveys, such as *Pop's Culture: A National Survey of Dads' Attitudes on Fathering*.

EQUIP

We equip fathers and develop leaders of national, state, and community fatherhood initiatives through curricula, training, and technical assistance. We provide workshops, training institutes, and technical assistance on fatherhood issues and programs to national, state, and community-based organizations and networks that operate in all sectors, including state and local government, civic organizations, faith-based groups, businesses, education, healthcare, and law enforcement. Our staff trains organizations on how to become father friendly, best practices in fatherhood programs, social marketing for fatherhood programs, evaluating fatherhood programs, and on how to create systems that support marriage. Through FatherSOURCE™, we provide several leading curricula on responsible fatherhood. FatherSOURCE™ also includes tip cards, brochures, guides, and posters.

ENGAGE

We engage every sector of society through strategic alliances and partnerships. We support coalitions of national, state, and local leaders from all sectors of society (e.g. social services, business, healthcare, civic, philanthropic, media, government, education, and faith) that seek to create a culture that values and supports responsible fatherhood. We have also collaborated with nationally renowned community-service organizations and businesses—such as the Salvation Army, YMCA, Federal Express, Warner Brothers Records, Disney, Sony Pictures, and Auntie Anne's Pretzels—to create unique initiatives that engage fathers and their families.

“When working with a mother on this issue, remember that the mother-father relationship is the most important relationship in the life of a child.”

Topic 1: Co-Parenting

Background

When we’ve talked with or surveyed staff and practitioners that work with mothers, fathers, and families about the issues mothers and fathers need the most help with, co-parenting is always at or near the top of the list.

While some literature on the subject of co-parenting considers it to be an area of focus for all parents to work on, the terms “co-parenting” and “co-parent” refer specifically to situations where parents are separated by divorce or who were never married to each other. (Another term used to describe the same situation is “shared parenting.”) In other words, co-parenting refers to parents living apart and trying to raise their children together.



The primary reason this issue appears at the top of the list is because it is often difficult for mothers and fathers who don’t live together to agree on how to raise their children. Another reason is that the mother-father relationship is often a poor one. The feelings the mother and father have about each other can poison how they parent their children alone and together.

When working with a mother on this issue, remember that the mother-father relationship is the most important relationship in the life of a child. It is the blueprint that a child uses in every relationship she develops; at least until she is mature enough to separate her own relationships, and how to behave in them, from her parents. Helping mothers and fathers to effectively co-parent may be the most helpful way you can help mothers, fathers, and children.

It’s vital to keep several things in mind. First, identify the quality of the relationship between the mother and father. Clearly, if the relationship is a good one, effective co-parenting might already exist or, at least, should be attainable. If the relationship is of poor quality, you’ll have your work cut out for you.

Second, identify the level of abuse (e.g. domestic violence) that is or was once present in the mother-father relationship. If the father abuses or abused the mother, the emotional scars left in the wake of abuse will make it difficult for her to find a way to move past it, even if the father has had counseling or completed a treatment program for the abuse.

Third, keep the mother focused on problems she can solve alone or with the father rather than problems she and the father can't solve. Parents often focus on the most difficult and unsolvable problems (at least unsolvable in the present). As a result, their co-parenting relationship doesn't improve because they haven't focused on what's possible to improve. They set themselves up for failure.

Fourth, identify whether the mother tends to try to win and seek to see the father lose when it comes to solving co-parenting challenges, and even with any challenge they might face in their relationship. Encourage the mother to compromise. Help her understand that she will rarely, if ever, completely get her way. She must be willing to work with the father in a give-and-take or win-win context.

Fifth, keep her focused on what's in the best interests of her children. If you find she has a hard time keeping their best interests in mind, use the topic entitled, "For Your Children's Sake" to get her focused on her children's best interests.

Finally, encourage the mother to seek to understand the father's point of view. If she has difficulty doing that, use the topic entitled, "Listening" to help her understand the importance of understanding his view.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers identify the main differences between them and the father of their children in raising their children.

Mothers identify how those differences affect their children.

Mothers might not think about how much the differences—and the difficulty they might have addressing them—can negatively affect their children. When mothers become aware of how the differences affect their children, it can provide them with the motivation they need to address the differences.

Mothers learn to focus on differences they can solve on their own or with the father of their children.

Mothers and fathers focus too often on the differences they can't solve rather than on the ones they can solve. Mothers need to identify solvable issues that will create "small wins" for them and the father and build from there.

Mothers learn to seek to better understand the father's point of view before sharing their own, and to help the father better understand the mother's view.

Learning how to listen first and talk second can pave the way for more effective communication between a mother and father on how to address their co-parenting issues.

Mothers learn the importance of respecting and valuing the father's point of view.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to resolve co-parenting issues when mothers don't respect or value the father's point of view.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- What are the main differences the father of my children and I have in raising our children? How have these issues affected our children?
- What are the differences I/we can solve? How can I/we solve them? What are the differences I/we can't solve?
- How can I better understand the point of view of my children's father on how to raise our children? How can I help the father of my children better understand my point of view on how to raise our children?
- Do I respect and value the father's point of view? If not, how can I better respect and value it?

Culturally speaking, girls and boys learn how to communicate from their parents, older siblings, friends, and society.

Topic 2:

Gender Communication

Background

When mothers and fathers effectively communicate, it helps them raise healthy children. It also helps mothers raising sons to know how their sons are “wired” to communicate. The same can be said for fathers raising daughters.

Many years ago the book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by psychologist John Gray created a craze around gender communication. This book spawned a talk show and a board game, and Gray wrote several spin-off books. In a nutshell, Gray discusses the differences between women and men that create conflict in relationships. He says that conflict arises in a relationship over time because women and men don’t understand their differences. When they come to understand and respect their differences, women and men can effectively communicate with one another.



One of ideas that Gray focuses on is the difference in the way that women and men think. Basically, women typically think in non-linear terms and with a great deal of emotion. They’re more process-oriented than men. They like to talk about the dynamics that surround an issue before they address it directly, and they’d rather deal with the problem immediately than go off somewhere to think about it first.

Men, on the other hand, lean toward logical, linear thinking that isn’t emotional. Men use fewer words to communicate ideas. Men like to get to the point instead of “talking out” an issue. When conflict arises, a man likes to go into what Gray calls the “cave” and think about the problem before discussing it with his partner.

Gender differences have a cultural and biological foundation. Culturally speaking, girls and boys learn how to communicate from their parents, older siblings, friends, and society. The biological piece to the puzzle involves everything from differences in the way that the brains of women and men are structured to the effects of hormones. Have you ever heard that women are “right-brained” and men are “left-brained?” This stereotype exists because the right side of the brain is the seat of our ability to think creatively, intuitively, subjectively, and holistically—ways

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of thinking typically associated with women. The left side of the brain houses our ability to think logically, objectively, systematically, and rationally—ways of thinking typically associated with men.

The fact is that this stereotype is limited because the left side of the brain also serves as our language center while the right side serves as our mathematics center. Women tend to be more skilled in language than men, and men tend to be more skilled at math than women. So, both sides of the brain serve women and men very well. The bottom line is that women and men use their brains differently, and this fact partly explains differences in the ways that women and men communicate.

In working with mothers on gender communication, it's important to tell them that there are “typical” ways, or patterns, in female-male communication. Avoid messages that say all women communicate in one way and all men in another way. Some women will communicate in ways more typical of men and vice versa. Mothers should use new knowledge about gender communication to more effectively communicate with the father of their children and with their sons, and to respect the ways in which the father and their sons communicate with them.

Be mindful that you can create some tension with this issue among mothers who might take offense to being characterized as communicating in the typical ways that mothers—or, for that matter, fathers—communicate. And be aware that there are cultural differences in typical verbal and non-verbal communication patterns. Prepare yourself by conducting research to understand the culturally acceptable communication patterns of the cultures of the mothers you serve.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers learn that there are differences in the typical verbal and non-verbal communication patterns of women and men.

There is a cultural and biological foundation for these differences.

Mothers learn that, while these differences exist, they should not use knowledge of them to assume that the father of their children or their sons will communicate using typical male patterns.

Likewise, their daughters—and even the mother—might not communicate using typical female patterns.

Mothers learn that some of the typical ways in which women communicate make it difficult for the father to understand them.

Mothers should be aware of these patterns and develop strategies to enhance communication and understanding. Women, for example, tend to use a lot more words (e.g. detail) than men when discussing an issue. Men, on the other hand, tend to use fewer words (e.g. less detail). Women should try to focus only on the most relevant information (less detail) when talking with men.

Mothers should give the father of their children the time he needs to process his emotions and to share them, especially during negative interactions.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- How much do I know about the typical ways in which women and men communicate?
- What are my typical verbal and non-verbal communication patterns? Are they like other women or are they different?
- What are the typical verbal and non-verbal communication patterns of the father of my children? Are they like other men or are they different?
- Which of my verbal and non-verbal communication patterns help me communicate well with the father of my children? Which of my communication patterns keep me from communicating well with him?
- What drives me crazy about the ways in which the father of my children communicates verbally and non-verbally? Why do those patterns drive me crazy? How can I learn to accept his patterns so that I can better understand him?
- Does the father of my children usually need time to think about the problems we have before he's ready to talk about or solve them? If so, do I give him the space he needs?

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Topic 3:

Dad's Importance to Child Well-Being

Background

Staffs and practitioners that work with mothers, fathers, and families tell us time and again that many of the mothers they serve simply don't understand how important fathers are to the well-being of children. At this very moment, more than 18 million children live without fathers in their lives. That's enough children to populate New York City twice and Los Angeles four times! Father absence isn't just one issue; it's many. Father absence is a crisis—for these children and for our nation. (National surveys show that 9 in 10 women and men think there is a father absence crisis.)

Children with involved, responsible, committed fathers do better, on average, across a range of issues of well-being than children who grow up without their fathers. Here are some of the most important issues.

Child Abuse: Children who grow up without a father are at greater risk of child abuse. Children who grow up with their fathers have a lower risk that they will be abused. One reason for this fact is that fathers protect their children. Children are safer when their dads are around.

Crime: Often, the story behind the story of a violent crime is an absent father. Children who grow up without their fathers are more likely to commit crimes. Good fathers regulate aggression, especially in boys. But it isn't just boys who need dads to keep them out of trouble. The fastest growing prison population is women and girls, many of whom grew up without their fathers. Children who grow up with their dads are less likely to go to prison.

Poverty: Children who grow up with their fathers are less likely to live in poverty. Nearly 50% of children under the age of 6 who grow up without their fathers live in poverty. The rise in homeless families—almost all of which are headed by single mothers with young children who live in poverty—has links to the rise in fatherless homes.



Children with involved, responsible, committed fathers do better, on average, across a range of issues of well-being than children who grow up without their fathers.

Physical Health: Even a child's health is tied to their father's presence.

- Children born to families with fathers are less likely to suffer from low birth weight. One reason for this fact is that a pregnant mother is more likely to get prenatal care when the father is involved in her pregnancy (such as goes to prenatal visits).
- Children who grow up with their fathers are less likely to suffer from certain illnesses (such as asthma) and to be injured.
- Children's weight is linked to a father's weight. If a father has a healthy weight, his children are more likely to have a healthy weight. Fathers often teach children about the importance of physical activity (exercise) because of the rough-and-tumble way they play with their children.

Drugs and Alcohol: Children are more likely to use and abuse alcohol and other drugs when they grow up without a father. Children might use drugs and alcohol to numb the pain they have from growing up without their fathers. And it isn't just whether a father is around. Closeness matters. The closer a child is to their father the less likely the child is to smoke and to use alcohol and other drugs.

Emotional and Behavioral Problems: Children who grow up without their fathers often suffer from "father hunger," which can cause nightmares, problems sleeping, and night terrors. Children who grow up with their fathers are less likely to suffer from mental problems and engage in anti-social behavior (such as aggression). Children with involved dads are more likely to get along well with others, be confident, and have good self-control. These children are also less likely to try to kill themselves.

Sex: A father's actions and values affect his daughter's views about boyfriends and husbands. His son learns about how to treat girls and women and what kind of father and husband he should become. When a father isn't around, his children can have a hard time seeing and finding good male role models.

- Girls raised with their dads are less likely to become pregnant as teens. Boys who live with their fathers are less likely to get girls pregnant.
- Girls who live in homes with their dads go through puberty later and are more likely to delay having sex.

Education: A famous proverb says, "A father is worth more than a hundred school masters." Children with involved dads are more likely to get As, to behave well in school, and stay in school. Pre-school children who live with their fathers are more likely to be read to every day. Children who live with their fathers are less likely to get behind in school or to repeat a grade. These children are also less likely to be suspended or expelled.

When working with mothers on this issue, share the information you just learned about the father's importance to children's well-being. Unless there is a legitimate reason for keeping the father away from the mother and children (e.g. his presence could lead to abuse of the mother or the children), a mother should do everything she can to encourage his involvement. National Fatherhood Initiative has a number of resources you can use to increase your own knowledge about the importance of fathers and the knowledge of mothers. Visit www.fatherhood.org and www.fathersource.org for more information.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers raise their awareness of the importance of fathers to children's well-being.

Mothers identify the range of outcomes for children that fathers can negatively affect when they're absent and positively affect when they're present.

Mothers become more open to encouraging the involvement of the father of their children.

While there may be other issues to address before a mother becomes comfortable with a father's involvement, increasing her general knowledge of the father's importance is a vital step toward increasing his involvement. (See the other topics in this guide for more information on other issues that a mother and father might need to address.)

Basic Questions for Mothers

- How much do I know, generally speaking, about the importance of fathers to children's well-being?
- What outcomes for children do fathers negatively affect when they're absent? What outcomes for children do fathers positively affect when they're present?
- If I knew more about why fathers are important to children's well-being, would I become more open to encouraging the father of my children to be more involved in their lives?

Maternal gatekeeping can damage the father-child relationship and the parents' ability to cooperate and keep their conflict levels low and out of the child's earshot or awareness.

Topic 4:

Restrictive Maternal Gatekeeping

Background

Maternal gatekeeping refers to a mother's protective beliefs about the desirability of a father's involvement in their child's life, and the behaviors acted upon that either facilitate or hinder collaborative childrearing (often called "shared parenting" or "co-parenting") between the parents. **Restrictive** maternal gatekeeping refers to situations in which maternal gatekeeping is unnecessary (e.g. the father is not a danger to his child). Maternal gatekeeping occurs regardless of whether parents are married, divorced or unmarried, and regardless of the parents' satisfaction with the relationship between them.



The cognitive aspects of maternal gatekeeping include preferences or beliefs about the father's involvement, satisfaction with his involvement, and the mother's view of the father's competence as a parent. The behavioral aspects can include how the mother speaks about the father in the presence of their child; to what extent the father is included or updated on the child's health, schooling or social life; and the extent to which the mother communicates to the father that she knows what is best for their child and the correct way to do things—while he does not.

The motivations for maternal gatekeeping vary widely. They depend on individual, couple, and familial circumstances and situations. Mothers might have a difficult time relinquishing familial responsibility, might want to validate their identity as "the mother" and garner recognition for their "maternal" or "feminine" contributions to the family, or might view the father as incompetent or even dangerous to the child. This latter view might be based either on actual evidence or her perceptions of him and his failures as a father. Furthermore, she might be protective of her child purely as a function of the child's age. If the child is not old enough to verbalize their own needs and desires, she might feel qualified to make decisions and judgments for that child.

Maternal gatekeeping can damage the father-child relationship and the parents' ability to cooperate and keep their conflict levels low and out of the child's earshot or awareness. It is well established that father involvement contributes to child well-being. Maternal gatekeeping

A mother might want to “pay back” the father for letting their child down, or hurt him in some way or for being a lousy parent or partner/spouse.

therefore poses an important and powerful threat to the vitality of the father-child relationship and the overall well-being and adjustment of the child.

When working with mothers on this issue, keep in mind that there are situations in which maternal gatekeeping is warranted (e.g. the father is a legitimate threat to the health and safety of the mother or their child). Aside from those situations, a mother might use gatekeeping on purpose or unwittingly as a weapon to unnecessarily exclude the child's father from the child's life. A mother might want to “pay back” the father for letting their child down, or hurt him in some way or for being a lousy parent or partner/spouse. A mother might not even realize when she takes revenge, and at other times realize it but find it hard to stop.

A mother might insist she hasn't been unfair and that the father deserved to be kept away from the child. Agree with a mother that, in situations where safety is at stake, she must be very careful. But sometimes, there is a way to let the father in a little, for the child's sake. If a mother is stuck on the negative, give her examples of how other mothers have let a father in especially if you know of a couple in a similar situation/facing a similar challenge. Maintain that unless the mother learns something about her own behavior, the father will undoubtedly not change either.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers identify whether they engage in restrictive gatekeeping.

As with any issue related to behavior change, awareness of the issue (problem) is the first step.

Mothers identify why they restrict the father's access to their children.

Help mothers to be specific about why they restrict access. Have them clearly identify the feelings, emotions, and thoughts they have that cause them to restrict access.

Mothers identify exactly how they restrict access.

Have them clearly identify the behaviors that restrict access.

Mothers identify the impact on their children of restricting the father's access to them.

A focus on the impact on mothers' children is often the key to motivating them to change restrictive behaviors.

Mothers learn the importance of loosening the father's access when it is in their children's best interests and there isn't a legitimate reason for restricting access (e.g. the father might endanger the children's or the mother's health and safety).

Basic Questions for Mothers

- In what ways do I control or restrict the access the father of my children has to my children?
- Why do I control or restrict his access? Do I control or restrict his access because I fear for the safety of my children? Do I control or restrict his access because I am angry with him and want to hurt or punish him? Do I control or restrict his access because I have a different view than he does on how best to raise our children?
- How does controlling or restricting his access affect our children? Does it help or hurt them?
- What is one way in which I can increase his access to my children? How and when will I communicate this way to him? Are there other ways in which I can increase his access?

“A mother can become so focused on punishing the father of her children for perceived or actual pain he caused her that she loses sight of what’s best for her children. . .”

Topic 5: For Your Children’s Sake

Background

Staff and practitioners that work with mothers, fathers, and families inevitably mention the need to keep mothers focused on what is best for their children as one of the top issues in mother-father relationships. Mothers, staff and practitioners say, can fail to put their children first (i.e. these mothers put their own welfare before that of their children).

Restrictive maternal gatekeeping can be one of the primary outcomes of this loss of focus on what’s best for children. If you haven’t yet read about that topic in this guide, restrictive maternal gatekeeping refers to situations in which maternal gatekeeping is unnecessary (e.g. the father is not a danger to his child). A mother can become so focused on punishing the father of her children for perceived or actual pain he caused her that she loses sight of what’s best for her children—the involvement of their father in the children’s lives.

When working with mothers on this issue, your objective is to help them acquire a focus on what’s best for their children or, if they once had this focus and lost it, to help them re-acquire it. You might encounter a mother in whom this lack of focus is endemic and another who has temporarily lost this focus and simply needs to regain it. Listen to what a mother says about the impact of her relationship with the father of their children to determine where the mother’s focus lies. Do the mothers talk more about the impact on them or on their children? You can also determine where her focus lies by identifying whom she talks about the most regardless of the topic—herself or her children.

Tread lightly. If you address this issue directly with a mother you suspect is not focused on the best interests of her children, she might close her mind to whether she lacks this focus because she thinks you are attacking her and saying she is a bad mother. It’s best to ask her questions—such as the ones we recommend later in this topic—that help her learn for herself that she lacks this focus.



Listen to what mothers say about the impact of their relationship with the fathers of their children to determine where mother's focus lays.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers learn that it's vital to focus on the best interests of their children before they focus on their own best interests.

Mothers' relationship with the father of their children can undergo dramatic change when mothers have this focus.

Mothers increase their awareness of what they want for their children.

Mothers must identify exactly what they want for their children, not a vague notion or general outcome. They should say, for example, "I want my child to have a successful marriage" rather than "I want my child to find love." If mothers are vague or speak in general terms, ask questions like "What, exactly, do you mean by that?"

Mothers increase their awareness of whether they, generally speaking, put their children's best interests before their own best interests.

Mothers must identify exactly how they do or do not put their children's best interests first. Again, they must be specific rather than general.

Mothers increase their awareness of whether they put their children's best interests first when resolving conflicts with the father of their children.

Some mothers will find it very difficult to achieve this level of awareness because of the raw feelings and emotions they experience when talking about their relationship with the father of their children. Be patient as you help mothers acquire this level of awareness.

Mothers learn the importance of identifying ways they, generally speaking, can put their children's best interests first, and ways the relationship with the father of their children can serve their children's best interests.

These are the outcomes you should seek to help mothers achieve. Increased awareness will do no good if they don't put a plan into place to behave in a manner consistent with putting their children first.

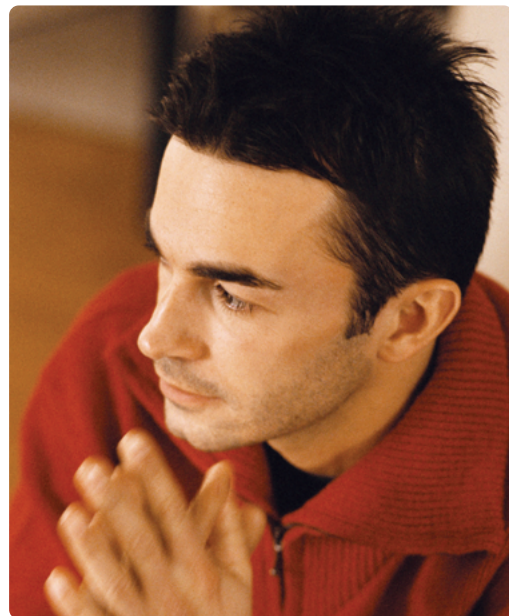
Basic Questions for Mothers

- What do I want for my children generally? What do I want for my children's futures? What do I want for my children today/in the present?
- In general, do I think more often about what's in my own or my children's best interests?
- When there is conflict between the father of my children and me, how often do I think about what's in the best interest of my children? Do I put my children's best interests first when I try to solve conflicts with the father of my children? If so, how do I put their best interests first? If not, why don't I put their best interests first?
- How can the relationship with the father of my children serve my children's best interests?
- What can I do, generally, to put the best interests of my children first? What can I do, specifically, to put the best interests of my children first when solving conflicts with the father of my children?

Topic 6: Trusting Dad

Background

Of all the issues addressed in this guide, the difficulty some mothers have in trusting the fathers of their children might be the most challenging one to help mothers overcome. Your ability to help a mother who distrusts the father of her children may depend on the amount of time you can spend with her and over what time period. It's unlikely you will be able to move the needle in a positive direction with a conversation or two. Moreover, helping a mother learn to trust the father might require more in-depth work with the couple together (e.g. professional counseling) than you can provide.



Nevertheless, you should at least be able to determine whether mothers distrust the father of their children by simply asking the right questions, some of which are included later in this topic. You might learn that a mother has never trusted the father of her children or not trusted him for a very long time. He may have done so many untrustworthy things from her perspective that the distrust has deep roots. In this case, it might be best to help her work around the lack of trust for the sake of her children. Seeing the situation through her children's eyes might help her see how to work with the father despite her lack of trust in him. (See the topic entitled, "For Your Children's Sake.") On the other hand, perhaps the distrust recently developed and there is hope for the father to regain her trust if they work through the issue(s) that created the lack of trust.

When working with mothers on this issue, remember that a lack of trust can mask a lack of agreement. In other words, a mother might not trust the father when she simply doesn't agree with him (e.g. on how to best raise their child). Help mothers define what they mean by trust, and you might find they really mean a lack of agreement. It's easier to help mothers address a lack of agreement.

Also keep in mind that trust and respect are closely linked. It's difficult for a mother to trust a father she doesn't respect. But in some cases, a mother can have general respect for a father whom she doesn't trust about certain things. In the latter case, help the mother identify when (under what circumstances) and the matters on which she trusts the father and doesn't, if she can begin to trust him more often and about certain things, and whether she's willing to engage him in areas where she can't trust him (and, if so, under what conditions).

“He may have done so many untrustworthy things from her perspective that the distrust has deep roots.”

*... a mother
might not
trust the
father when
she simply
doesn't agree
with him
(e.g. on how
to best
raise their
child).*

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers learn about the difference between a lack of trust and a lack of agreement.

Helping mothers understand the difference and which is more prevalent in their relationship with the father of their children might determine how challenging a path they have in creating a healthy or, at least, good enough relationship when it comes to raising their children together.

Mothers learn that trust and respect are closely linked.

It's difficult for a mother to trust a father she doesn't respect, but she might learn how to trust a father more when she has some respect for him.

Mothers increase their awareness of the specific ways in which they don't trust and don't agree with the father of their children, especially when it comes to the care of their children.

Mothers must identify the specific ways in which and reasons why they don't trust or agree with the father. Without homing in on specifics, it's impossible to develop a plan to address areas of mistrust and lack of agreement.

Mothers learn it's vital to focus on the ways in which they can trust the father of their children and not dwell on the ways in which they can't trust him.

Although some mothers can overcome a lack of trust in the father of their children, that's much less likely to happen when the trust has deep roots. It's better for a mother in this situation, her children, and the father to focus on how to work with the father within the confines of her trust of him.

Basic Questions for Mothers

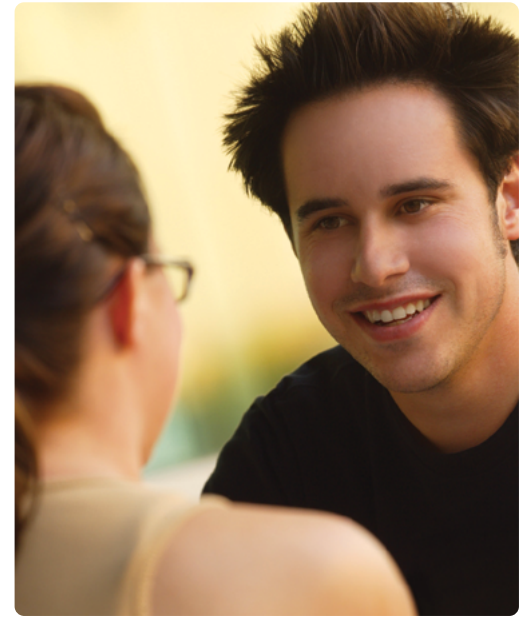
- Do I understand the difference between a lack of trust and a lack of agreement?
- Do I generally trust the father of my children? If yes, why do I trust him? If not, why don't I trust him?
- Do I generally agree with the father of my children?
- Do I trust the father of my children with the care of our children? If yes, why do I trust him with their care? If not, why don't I trust him with their care? What, specifically, do I not trust him to do when it comes to their care?
- Do I tend to agree with the father of my children on how to care for our children?
- If I don't trust the father of my children generally, specifically in the care of our children, or both, do I really not trust him or do I simply not agree with him? If I don't trust him to discipline the children, for example, is it because he can't discipline them at all or that he disciplines them differently than I do?
- In what ways do I trust the father of my children with the care of our children? Can I focus on those ways rather than on the ways in which I don't trust him?

“Respect means that someone has regard for, takes into consideration, or even values another person generally or in certain circumstances.”

Topic 7: Mutual Respect

Background

One of the primary barriers to mothers and fathers working together for the sake of their children is a lack of mutual respect. A lack of mutual respect creates a barrier to the open, safe communication between mothers and the father of their children that's necessary to work through issues and come to agreements on how to effectively parent children. A lack of mutual respect also leads to a lack of trust between parents and vice versa. (See the topic entitled, “Trusting Dad” for more information on the impact of a lack of trust between mothers and fathers.) A lack of respect and trust is especially difficult to overcome.



Respect means that someone has regard for, takes into consideration, or even values another person generally or in certain circumstances. Mutual respect simply extends this definition to a relationship between two people. Mutual respect is, particularly for men, very important for open, safe communication. Without it, neither party will even consider what the other party thinks or feels generally or about certain situations (e.g. how to raise a child).

When working with mothers on this issue, help them understand that they can only control whether they have respect for the father of their children. A mother cannot control whether the father of her children respects her. Nevertheless, the more she respects him, the more he is likely to respect her, but she must be willing to be the first one to extend the olive branch, so to speak.

To extend the olive branch, mothers must be open to respecting the father's views. To help a mother make this outreach manageable, have her identify at least one area in which she is willing to consider the father's view—an issue regarding their children, for example, about which she and the father can talk and need to reach agreement. It's vital that she identify an area where success has a high probability so the parents can start to establish a foundation of mutual respect, and because it might not be possible to reach mutual respect on every issue. Encourage her to get his view first, listen more than she talks, and pay attention to her body language to ensure it doesn't communicate a lack of respect (e.g. rolling of her eyes, looking down at the ground while he talks, etc.). If during the conversation, the father sends verbal and non-verbal messages that show a lack of respect for the mother's view, tell her to avoid getting emotional and that it's okay for her to calmly walk away and tell the father that they can talk again when he's willing to respect her view. Explain that it isn't worth it to continue to talk about an issue when mutual respect is absent.

“Encourage her to get his view first, listen more than she talks, and pay attention to her body language to ensure it doesn’t communicate a lack of respect.”

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers identify whether there is mutual respect between them and the father of their children.

Finding at least one area in which mutual respect exists is a great starting point for improving relationships between mothers and fathers.

Mothers identify ways in which they and the father of their children show respect for each other or a lack of it.

Without being specific, it’s not possible to know where it’s possible to have open, safe communication and where it isn’t or which issues the parents need to work on.

Mothers identify ways in which mutual respect and a lack of respect between them and the father of their children affects their children.

Anytime a mother loses sight of the impact of her relationship with the father on her children, she might be unwilling to entertain extending the olive branch (or being receptive to the father if he extends it first). When she realizes that there might be areas in which she and the father have mutual respect, she will be more open to working on areas in which they don’t. Keeping her focused on how a lack of mutual respect negatively affects her children can make all the difference to her being open to work with the father.

Mothers identify whether they can respect the father even if he doesn’t respect her.

If a mother is willing to respect the father even when he doesn’t respect her, she might lay the foundation for his eventual respect for her.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- Do I respect or lack respect for the father of my children? Do I respect or lack respect for him as a man and father? What specific things about him, as a father, do I respect? What specific things about him, as a father, do I not respect?
- In what ways do I show respect for him in front of our children? In what ways do I show a lack of respect for him in front of our children? Are there things I say or do (e.g. body language) that show respect or a lack of respect in front of our children?
- Does the father of my children respect or lack respect for me? Does the father of my children respect or lack respect for me as a woman and mother? What specific things about me, as a mother, does he respect? What specific things about me, as a mother, does he not respect?
- In what ways does he show respect for me in front of our children? In what ways does he show a lack of respect for me in front of our children? Are there things he says or does (e.g. body language) that show respect or a lack of respect in front of our children?
- What is the affect on our children when the father and I show respect for each other? What is the affect on our children when we show a lack of respect for each other?
- Can I respect the father of my children even if he doesn’t respect me?

Two areas that cause conflict between mothers and the father of their children are issues of control and unmet expectations.

Topic 8:

Conflict Resolution

Background

Almost every staffer and practitioner that works with mothers, fathers, and families mentions conflict resolution as an issue. That's not a surprise when considering the fact that, regardless of the quality of a relationship, the ability to solve conflicts can make or break a relationship. It's even less surprising because so many of the individuals and organizations that use NFI's resources work with mothers and fathers who are no longer together. The inability to effectively resolve conflicts was almost always a precursor to the end of those relationships.

Two areas that cause conflict between mothers and the father of their children are issues of control and unmet expectations. The majority of this topic focuses on the conflict that unmet expectations can create. (For even more information on the impact of control issues on conflict, see the topic entitled, "Power and Control.") Some mothers try to control the behavior of fathers generally and in specific situations (e.g. fathers' access to their children, as in restrictive maternal gatekeeping—see the topic entitled, "Restrictive Maternal Gatekeeping" for more information). When fathers think mothers try to control their behavior—or when fathers don't behave in the way mothers want them to—it leads to conflict between mothers and fathers.

Some mothers often have unrealistic expectations of fathers that fathers can't possibly meet. These and other mothers can also have realistic expectations of fathers that fathers can but don't meet. Regardless of whether an unmet expectation is unrealistic or realistic, the outcome is the same—the unmet expectation leads to conflict between mothers and fathers.

When working with mothers on this issue, helping them address issues of control and unmet expectations can greatly reduce conflict. Therefore, it's vital you help them learn how to let go of control over the father's behavior. They cannot control it and trying to do so leads to conflict. You must help them identify exactly what they try to control, why they try to control it, and how they can let go of it. Help them identify the impact of trying to control the father's behavior on their children.



When fathers think mothers try to control their behavior—or when fathers don't behave in the way mothers want them to—it leads to conflict between mothers and fathers.

Similarly, you must help mothers identify the unrealistic and realistic expectations they have of the father. Challenge them to understand why certain expectations are unrealistic and why it's not helpful to expect the father to do those things. When they gain this understanding, encourage them to let go of those expectations. When it comes to realistic expectations, tell mothers it's okay to have them but that they should let go of whether the father meets them because of the potential for conflict when the father doesn't meet them. Help them identify the impact of the unmet expectations on their children.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers learn that the expectations they have for the father of their children can lead to conflict when the father doesn't meet those expectations.

Mothers learn that when they attempt to control at least some of the behavior of the father of their children, it can lead to conflict.

Mothers learn that conflict between them and the father of their children can have a negative affect on their children.

Realizing the impact that conflict has on children can make all the difference in mothers' willingness to let go of control and unmet expectations.

Mothers learn the importance of identifying ways to reduce the amount of conflict between them and the father of their children and to resolve it more quickly when it occurs.

While there are many techniques mothers can learn to reduce conflict when it occurs (e.g. certain communication skills), learning to let go of control over the father's behavior and whether the father meets the mother's expectations are two of the most important ways to resolve conflict because they address conflict before it starts.

Mothers identify the expectations they have for the father of their children, both those that are realistic and unrealistic.

Mothers must learn to separate realistic from unrealistic expectations so they can hold the father accountable for what he can control rather than what he cannot control.

Mothers learn that it's fair to have realistic expectations of the father of their children, but unfair to have unrealistic expectations of him.

Learning that it's fair to have some expectations, but not others, liberates a mother from concern or guilt about holding the father accountable for what he can control.

Mothers learn that when the father doesn't meet the mother's expectations—regardless of whether those expectations are realistic or unrealistic—it can exact a toll on her.

Mothers may not realize exactly how much of a toll unmet expectations have on them or the relationship with the father.

Mothers learn that it's vital they let go of the expectations they have for the father of their children.

Regardless of whether an expectation is realistic or unrealistic, mothers must let go of whether the father meets expectations. Letting go is separate from holding him accountable for realistic expectations.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- What are the one or two areas/things that lead to the most conflict between the father of my children and me? Why does it/do they lead to conflict?
- Are there ways in which I try to control at least some of the behavior of the father of my children? If so, do my attempts to control him lead to conflict between us? Can I let go of trying to control his behavior? What will happen if I let go of trying to control his behavior?
- How do the father of my children and I usually handle conflict? What do I usually say or do when we have conflict? What does he usually say or do when we have conflict? When we have conflict, do I try to win and make him lose, or do I try to help us both win and feel good about the outcome?
- When the father of my children and I have conflict, how does it affect our children? Do I think about the affect on our children when I have conflict with him?
- Have I tried to learn ways to reduce the amount of conflict between the father of my children and me? Have I tried to learn ways to better resolve conflict when we have it?
- What expectations do I have of the father of my children? How do I expect him to treat me? How do I expect him to treat our children?
- What realistic expectations do I have of the father of my children? What unrealistic expectations do I have of him?
- Is it fair or unfair for me to have realistic expectations of the father of my children? Is it fair or unfair for me to have unrealistic expectations of him?
- Do I have expectations of the father of my children that he doesn't meet? If so, what are they? Why doesn't he meet them? Does he have control over whether he meets them?
- What happens when he doesn't meet them? How do I feel when he doesn't meet them? What do I do or say when he doesn't meet them?
- How can I learn to let go of whether the father of my children meets the expectations I have of him, regardless of whether those expectations are realistic or unrealistic?

“Power is the ability to exert strength of force on something or someone.”

Topic 9:

Power and Control

Background

It's important to address power and control in relationships between mothers and the father of their children because it often underlies, leads, or is otherwise related to other issues that are more apparent in relationships.

Power is the ability to exert strength of force on something or someone. Most people think of physical force when they think of power, but it can also involve emotional or mental force exerted verbally (e.g. manipulation). **Control** means to restrain or hold something or someone in check. It can also mean to direct or have command over something or someone. The two terms are closely linked in the context of relationships, which is why we address them as one topic or issue instead of two. One or both parents may use power to exert or maintain control and vice versa.

When you broaden your concept of power in relationships, it's easy to see how a mother and a father can have power and control over certain aspects of their relationship and different aspects of their family's life. A mother can have power and control, for example, over her family's finances (e.g. she decides which bills to pay and when) and participation of the family in her children's school-related activities (e.g. she tells the father when he should attend a school-related activity). A father can have power and control, for example, in decisions regarding where the family lives, the kind of housing it uses, and when to discipline and punish children.

When people think of power and control in a relationship, negative thoughts often come to mind. They might think, for example, of a father who maintains control over the mother through physical force (e.g. actual or threatened violence), or of a mother who maintains control of her children by manipulating them. The fact is the use of power and control can be healthy or unhealthy within a relationship. The healthy or good use of power and control involves the use of your power and control to help someone else use or keep power and control over what they do with their lives. The good use of power and control means that you don't steal someone else's power and control from them.



Control means to restrain or hold something or someone in check. It can also mean to direct or have command over something or someone.

Unfortunately, it's the unhealthy use of power and control that creates problems in relationships. The unhealthy use of power and control leads to power struggles between mothers and fathers. Parents attempt to gain the upper hand in their relationship generally, an aspect of it, or in some aspect of their family's life. Power struggles can manifest in restrictive gatekeeping behavior on the part of both parents. (See the topic entitled, "Restrictive Maternal Gatekeeping" for more information on restrictive gatekeeping. Fathers can also use their power and control to restrict the mother's access to their children.)

Power struggles prevent parents from effectively communicating with each other to solve problems in a mutually beneficial manner. Trying to "win" a discussion, for example, makes it impossible to listen clearly or to communicate in a tone the other person can hear without getting defensive. Instead of an emphasis on parental cooperation, the focus shifts to blame or punishment of the other parent, or to prove a point. Some parents bring their children into the middle of their struggle because they think the children are the only or best way to get the other parent to do what they want or to feel badly for what they previously did.

When working with mothers on this issue, it's vital to help them understand the role of power and control in their relationship with the father and to what level they and the father use power and control in unhealthy or healthy ways. When it comes to exerting their own control, explain to a mother that when things don't turn out way she wants when she tries to control the father (or some aspect of their family life), she can experience anger, fear, helplessness, a lack of power, and many other feelings and emotions that take a toll on her, her relationship with the father, and her relationships with her children.

Encourage mothers to let go of unhealthy uses of power and control. While this can be very difficult for a mother to do—especially if she thinks a father will be unwilling to do the same with his unhealthy uses of it—letting go will help her and her family simply because she'll be in a better place mentally and emotionally. Encourage her to take the courageous step to tell the father that she will let go of power and control in the unhealthy ways you help her identify. That act alone might motivate the father to do the same. If she is unwilling or for some reason cannot talk with the father (e.g. he is permanently unavailable/unreachable), encourage her to tell a family member or friend of her commitment.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers learn what it means to have power and control in a relationship.

The first step is to help mothers learn what it means to have power and control before they can dig into how it affects the relationship with the father of their children.

Mothers learn that they usually have at least some power and control in the relationship with the father of their children.

Identifying ways in which mothers have power and control may help mothers feel better about themselves, especially when they are in a relationship with a father who exerts a lot of unhealthy power and control.

Mothers increase their awareness of the healthy and unhealthy ways in which they use power and control in the relationship with the father of their children.

Mothers learn the importance of increasing the healthy ways in which they use power and control and reduce the unhealthy ways in which they use power and control.

Mothers should develop a plan for how to reduce the unhealthy ways they use power and control. You might be able to help them create such a plan.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- Do I know what it means to have power in a relationship? Do I know what it means to have control in a relationship?
- In what ways do I have power in the relationship with the father of my children? In what ways does the father of my children have power in our relationship?
- In what ways do I have control in the relationship with the father of my children? In what ways does the father of my children have control in our relationship?
- Are there any positive/good/healthy ways I use my power in our relationship? If so, what are they and how are they positive/good?
- Are there any negative/bad/unhealthy ways I use my power in our relationship? If so, what are they and how are they negative/bad?
- Are there any positive/good/healthy ways I use my control in our relationship? If so, what are they and how are they positive/good?
- Are there any negative/bad/unhealthy ways I use my control in our relationship? If so, what are they and how are they negative/bad?
- In what ways can I use the power and control I have in our relationship in positive/good/healthy ways? In what ways can I stop using the power and control I have in our relationship that is negative/bad/unhealthy?

“She may be so focused on the anger she has for the father that she doesn’t realize the impact of her anger on her children.”

Topic 10:

Angry with Dad

Background

The anger a mother harbors toward the father of her children is an all too common barrier to her willingness to encourage the father’s involvement in the lives of their children. While anger can result from a single or a few incidents between the parents, it often results from a long history of problems in their relationship. This kind of deep-rooted anger—the kind that a mother can harbor for years—may be linked to a range and combination of issues, such as a history of abuse by the father, unmet expectations on the part of the father, and the failure of the father generally as a parent and husband or partner. The anger only deepens when the mother continues to experience these issues after the romantic relationship with the father has ended.



When a mother cannot get past the anger she has for the father of her children, it can be extremely difficult to help her understand the importance of the father’s involvement in the lives of their children and to allow him access to them. That’s because the anger justifies the actions she takes to restrict or prevent his access altogether. She may be so focused on the anger she has for the father that she doesn’t realize the impact of her anger on her children. She may display dysfunctional ways to manage anger, for example, and not realize how the anger limits or prevents the father’s involvement in the lives of her children. She may also be angry over issues that she lacks the ability to change (e.g. are only within the father’s ability to change).

But anger also acts as a defense mechanism. That’s because anger is a secondary emotion that is usually the result of past pain or hurt a mother has not dealt with—it is the face of past pain or hurt. Past pain or hurt results from loss that, in turn, results from grief. Some mothers use the anger to defend themselves against exploring and addressing the root cause of anger: unresolved loss and grief. A mother may not realize the depth of the loss of the relationship with the father (i.e. a failed relationship) and the grief caused by that loss.

When working with mothers on this issue, it requires awareness of anger’s function as a defense mechanism against exploring and addressing unresolved loss and grief. Helping mothers grieve the loss attached to the relationship with the father is vital to exploring and addressing her anger. So while it is important to help mothers identify the sources of their anger, its impact on her children, and how to manage their anger in the near term, those actions are only a first step.

“Some mothers use the anger to defend themselves against exploring and addressing the root cause of anger: unresolved loss and grief.”

The second step is to help mothers identify the thoughts, emotions, and feelings caused by the anger, which will almost always include loss and grief. Spending the bulk of your time helping mothers grieve the losses created by the relationship with the father is the best way to help mothers address their anger and, hopefully, reach a place of comfort in encouraging the father's involvement in the lives of their children. Helping mothers to effectively grieve may require more in-depth work than you can provide, so be prepared to refer mothers to professional counseling.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers increase their awareness of how their anger toward the father of their children affects their willingness to allow him to be involved in the lives of their children.

Mothers must link cause and effect.

Mothers identify the primary source(s) of their anger.

Without identifying the source(s), it is impossible to identify the thoughts, emotions, and feelings that those sources cause. They must specify the source(s) and whether it is within or beyond their ability to change them. If there are multiple sources, they should identify which one(s) has the most impact on their anger and address it first, if possible.

Mothers identify how often their children see them become angry with the father of their children, how their children react to seeing them angry, and how their children are affected by seeing them angry.

When mothers see the impact of their anger on their children, it can provide them with the perspective they need to address their anger and, eventually, the loss and grief that caused the anger.

Mothers identify ways they can better handle and show their anger and whether they have people in their lives they can talk with when they become angry with the father of their children.

When the way mothers handle and show their anger is particularly problematic (e.g. lots of screaming, throwing items, taking anger out on children, etc.), it's vital to first help them stop dysfunctional and harmful reactions and substitute them with functional, healthy ones.

Mothers increase their awareness that loss and grief is at the foundation of their anger.

Reaching this level of awareness may happen only after mothers learn functional, healthy ways of handling and showing their anger.

Mothers become willing to grieve losses as a long-term solution to addressing the anger they have for the father of their children.

Be patient because this willingness may take time to develop.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- How often am I angry with the father of my children? Is it often, sometimes, rarely, or never?
- Why do I become angry with the father of my children? Why does that thing/those things make me angry? Is it/Are those something that is/are within my control to change? Can I learn to let it go of it/them so I don't become angry about it/them?
- (If multiple sources of anger) What most often leads to me becoming angry with him? How can I best address that source of my anger (e.g. talk with the father, let go of it, etc.)?
- When I become angry with the father of my children, what do I usually say or do? Why do I react that way?
- How often do my children see me become angry with their father? Is it often, sometimes, rarely, or never? How do my children react when they see me become angry with him? How are my children affected when they see me become angry with him?
- What can I do to better handle and show my anger toward the father of my children, especially when my children are around?
- Do I have someone in my life I can talk with when I become angry with the father of my children who can help me better handle and show my anger toward him?
- What thoughts, feelings, and emotions does the anger cause in me? Why does it cause those thoughts/feelings/emotions?
- Does my anger result from some kind of loss (e.g. the loss of a husband or partner, the loss of a good father for my children, etc.)? Have I grieved that loss? If not, how can I start to grieve that loss? If I grieve that loss, what effect will it have on my anger toward my children's father?

When working with mothers on this issue, help them understand when they can encourage his involvement (and how) and when it is a lost cause.

Topic 11:

When Dad is Absent

Background

One of the greatest sources of frustration for staff and practitioners that work with mothers, fathers, and families is how to help mothers when fathers are completely absent (out of the picture). How a mother deals with the impact on her and what she tells her children about their father's absence depends a great deal on the reason for the absence (e.g. death, deployment, incarceration, or he just walked out). The focus of this topic is on situations in which fathers are alive and absent because of incarceration or their own choice.

Mothers must be willing to reach out to these absent fathers and encourage their involvement.

There might be a number of reasons why a mother might not be willing to do so, but a lack of willingness is often caused by her anger toward the father for abandoning her and their children. If she is angry with him, she must explore and address her anger, loss, and grief first before reaching out to him. (See the topic entitled, "Angry with Dad" for more information.)

If a mother has reached out to the father and he has refused to become involved in the lives of their children there is, unfortunately, nothing more she can do to get him involved. She can and must, however, explore and address how the absence affects her and her children. She must explore and address the thoughts, emotions, and feelings she has about his absence; whether she expresses her thoughts, emotions, and feelings in healthy or unhealthy ways and how those ways affect her children; identify how to move past the absence and its impact; and address the father's absence with her children as soon as she is ready and they are mature enough to start talking about it. She must help her children work through their thoughts, emotions, and feelings about his absence.

When working with mothers on this issue, help them understand when they can encourage the father's involvement (and how) and when it's a lost cause. When they can encourage the father's involvement, help mothers work through their own issues with the father (e.g. anger and how it affects the mother and her children) and then identify a plan of action for encouraging the father's involvement. Help mothers understand that they can only control their actions and not those of the father. They must let go of whether the father does his part.



... help her understand that just because the father's involvement is a lost cause today doesn't mean it will always be a lost cause ...

When the father's involvement is a lost cause—and the mother has tried everything she can to encourage the father's involvement—help her understand that she must let go of the father's involvement and move on. Also help her understand that just because the father's involvement is a lost cause today doesn't mean it will always be a lost cause, and that she should be open to the father reaching out in the future as long as his involvement is not a legitimate threat to the mother or their children (e.g. potential for abuse).

Tell mothers in this situation that they must also help their children move on. A mother can talk about an absent father with her children as soon as they can start to understand/know he is gone, but a good time is when her children first start to ask about him. When children ask about their father, a mother must tell the truth about him in kind, simple ways that are age appropriate. She must not project her emotions and feelings (especially negative ones) about him onto her children so that those emotions and feelings become her children's emotions and feelings about their father. (This potential transference of feelings is why it's critical that she first work through her thoughts, emotions, and feelings about the father's absence before she helps her children process his absence.) The mother must let her children know the father's absence has nothing to do with them. Unfortunately, children often think their father left them and their mother because of something they said or did or simply for the fact that they exist (e.g. the father decided he did not want to be a father to them). As a result, she may have to deliver the message that her children are not to blame on a frequent basis.

When a father's involvement is a lost cause, it becomes even more critical that children have good male role models in their lives. Unfortunately, single mothers can sometimes think that they are or can be both a mother and father to their children. (The adult children of single mothers often hold this belief, too—that their mothers fulfilled both roles.) The fact is a mother cannot also be a father and vice versa. Nevertheless, this belief can present a barrier to a mother addressing the father's absence regardless of the willingness of the mother or the father for the father to become involved.

Mothers may also hold this belief because they're afraid to let another male into their children's lives, even a positive one. They may be afraid that another man/other men will simply hurt them and their children. Unfortunately, this is sometimes the case when a mother has a number of romantic relationships with men who interact with her children and, essentially, abandon them all over again when the relationships end. Therefore, encourage mothers to look for positive male role models with whom they are not and would not become romantically involved. Good candidates are often family members—grandfathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins. They can also be outstanding men in the community, such as faith leaders, teachers, and coaches. Mothers can also find these role models in organizations that provide volunteer mentors, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers identify what they think and how they feel about the absence of their children's father.

Mothers also identify the impact on them of the father's absence. This is a vital first step in helping mothers move past a father's absence and, eventually, help their children move past it, too.

Mothers increase their awareness of how vital it is that they let go of the anger, loss, and grief they might have about the father's absence.

See the topic entitled, "Angry with Dad" for more information on how to help mothers in this area.

Mothers identify how the father's absence affects their children and raise their own awareness about the importance of helping their children process his absence.

Mothers must not dwell on processing their own reaction to the father's absence. They must also help their children process their reactions. Ironically, in doing so, mothers will continue to address their own reaction.

Mothers learn that they must not allow their own feelings about the father of their children, especially negative ones, to influence what they tell their children about their father. They must let their children develop their own feelings about their father.

Learning the importance of not transferring their own feelings onto their children can be one of the most challenging aspects of working with mothers on this issue. The temptation to turn their children into allies against their father can be a very strong one.

Mothers learn that it's vital to tell their children that their father's absence has nothing to do with their children (i.e. it's not their children's fault).

Mothers know that, while they can be an excellent parent, they can't be both a mother and father to their children, and that their children need good/positive male role models in their lives.

If men don't proactively step up to the plate, mothers will need to proactively reach out. They should develop a list of role models (non-romantic) to approach and approach them.

Mothers know that it's important to allow the father to come back into their children's lives (or for the first time) as long as there isn't a legitimate reason for not allowing him to become involved (e.g. his involvement would endanger the children's or mother's health and safety).

Mothers raise their awareness that they cannot be both a mother and a father to their children.

Be careful about the need to address this belief head on. A mother might be open to positive male role models despite holding this belief.

Mothers identify positive male role models for their children—models with whom they are not and will not become romantically involved.

Identifying these role models does not mean that a mother cannot allow for a romantic relationship, especially a healthy one that might lead to a permanent relationship (e.g. marriage) that would benefit her children. These non-romantic relationships simply eliminate the issues for children that romantic relationships can create when those relationships are unhealthy and unstable.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- How do I feel about the absence of the father of my children? Am I glad that he's not around? Am I sad or angry that he's not around? Do I have mixed feelings?
- If I'm sad or angry that the father of my children is not around, do I know that it's vital I let go of that sadness or anger? What can I do to let go of that sadness or anger? How can I start to grieve the loss of my children's father?
- Are my children old enough to learn the truth about why their father isn't around? Are they old enough for me to share what I know/remember about their father?
- What do I tell my children about their father? Do I focus on the facts about him—such as his age, where he is, and what he does/did for work—or on what I think and feel about him?
- If I focus mostly on what I think and feel about him, do I focus on the things I don't /didn't like about him? Do I focus on the things I like/liked about him? Why do I need to focus on what I think and feel about him?
- If I tell my children what I think and feel about their father, do I know that doing so could shape their view of him? Is it fair to do that to them?
- How can I focus more on the facts about him when talking with my children rather than on what I think or feel about him?
- Have I told my children that their father's absence has nothing to do with them? If not, why haven't I said that to them? If yes, do they believe that it has nothing to do with them?
- Do I know that, while I can be a great parent for my children, I can't be both a mother and a father to them? Do I know they need good/positive male role models around them? Do I know these role models should be men I am not romantically involved with?
- Do my children have good/positive male role model(s) around? Have I done everything I can to ensure that my children have good/positive male role models?
- If my children's father decides he wants to become involved in our children's lives, am I willing to let him do so? If not, is the reason in the best interests of my children?

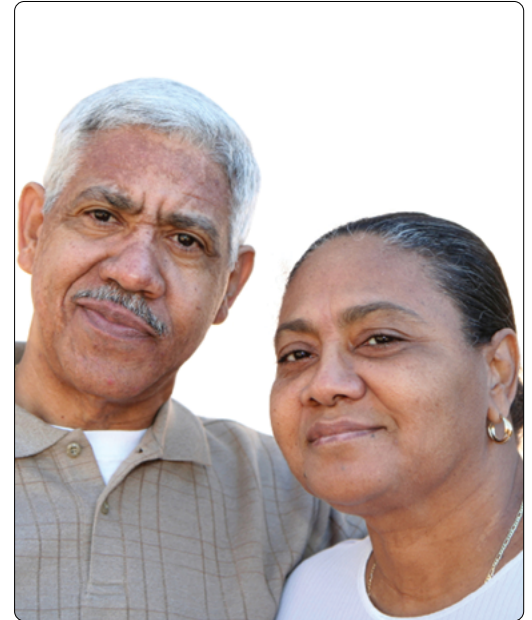
“Her childhood experiences can have a major impact on the relationship with the father.”

Topic 12:

Family of Origin

Background

A mother's family of origin is often an overlooked issue when it comes to improving the relationships between mothers and fathers for the sake of their children. That's because mothers and the individuals and staff of organizations that work with them focus on what mothers say and do in the present and fail to explore what might have caused mothers to say and do those things. Mothers may say and do things that indicate a lack of trust in a father, anger with a father, restrictive gatekeeping, and a host of other issues addressed in this guide that are extremely apparent. While those are critical issues to address, it's also vital to address the factors that contribute to those issues.



One of those factors is how a mother's family of origin affects how she views men and fathers. Her childhood experiences can have a major impact on the relationship with the father. Unless she explores how those experiences shape her view of the father and their relationship, it may be difficult for her to address the present issues that cause them to struggle in their relationship and, ultimately, the negative impact of the relationship on their children.

When working with mothers on the impact of their family of origin, help them explore how the relationship between their own mother (or primary mother figure) and father (or primary father figure) affected them generally and in specific ways. In doing so, you may help the mother raise awareness not only of how it affected her but how her relationship with the father must also affect their children (e.g. in the same negative way she was affected). Ask her about how her mother viewed her father and men in general. Ask her how her father viewed her mother and women in general. Ask her how her mother and father affected the traits in a mother and father she values and does not value.

After you help mothers explore the impact of their family of origin, help them explore how their upbringing shapes their relationship with the father. Ask her how those experiences contribute to what she expects (or expected) of the father as a husband or partner and a father. (See the topic entitled, "Expectations" for more information on the impact of expectations on the relationship between a mother and father.)

“After you help mothers explore the impact of their family of origin, help them explore how their upbringing shapes their relationship with the father.”

After you help mothers explore the impact of their family of origin and how those experiences shape their relationship with the father of their children, help her identify the impact of their relationship on their children. Help them see how their childhood experiences contribute to their relationship with the father, which in turn affects their children. Challenge mothers to change what they can in themselves (e.g. expectations of the father) and in the relationship (e.g. becoming more willing to allow him access to his children) for the sake of their children.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers raise their awareness of how their family of origin affects what they think and feel about the father of their children generally and the relationship with him specifically.

Helping mothers explore their family of origin can contribute to addressing many of the other issues addressed in this guide.

Mothers learn that their relationship with the father can be affected by the kind of relationship their own mother (or primary mother figure) and father (or primary father figure) had with each other.

Some mothers will become the kind of mother and wife or partner that mirrors their own mother or in ways that are very different from their own mother. Mothers may be not be aware of the impact of their own parents' relationship or quite conscious of it having decided to be the kind of mother and wife or partner they became because of the positive or negative impact of their own parents' relationship.

Mothers raise their awareness of how their childhood experiences contribute to how they see the father of their children generally and in specific ways, which in turn affects their children.

A mother with a poor relationship with the father of her children will likely need this perspective to do everything she can to change herself and what she can control in the relationship with the father.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- How did/does my mother affect the way I see/think about the relationship with the father of my children? How did/does my father affect the way I see/think about the relationship with the father of my children?
- How did my mother view the father of my children and other men generally? Do I have the same or a different view? What affect did her view of my father, or other men generally, have on the way I see the father of my children?
- How does the way my mother and father treated each other affect the way I treat the father of my children? How is the relationship I have with the father of my children like that of the relationship between my mother and father? How is the relationship I have with the father of my children different than that of the relationship between my mother and father?

- Are there traits that my father had/has that I don't like that the father of my children also has? Are there traits that my father had/has that I like that the father of my children also has?
- How does the way in which I was raised affect how I see/think about the relationship with the father of my children?
- How does the relationship I have with my children's father affect my children? What can I do to change what I think and feel about him and our relationship for the sake of our children?

Discipline involves teaching children to respect authority, to control their emotions, and to appropriately react to the behavior of others.

Topic 13:

Discipline of Children

Background

One of the most practical issues in the relationships between mothers and fathers—yet still a challenging one—is how to effectively coordinate and carry out the discipline of children. This issue can be particularly problematic when the mother and father do not live together and discipline their children (or don't, as the case may be) in different homes and sometimes with the influence of new spouses or partners.

There are two separate but related aspects with this issue. The first aspect is whether the parents effectively discipline and punish their children (i.e. they understand the proper role of discipline and punishment and know and use healthy techniques). The second aspect is whether the parents effectively coordinate discipline and punishment, and whether coordination is possible. Let's first address effective discipline and punishment. (You can apply the guidance that follows to working with mothers on child discipline even if they are unwilling or unable to coordinate discipline with the father.)

When working with mothers on this issue, it's best to first address how they discipline their children before exploring how to coordinate with the father. To start, help mothers understand that effectively carrying out discipline begins with an understanding of the purpose of discipline and how it differs from punishment. Too often, parents think they're one in the same. Discipline involves teaching children to respect authority, to control their emotions, and to appropriately react to the behavior of others. The goal of discipline is to develop the character children need to succeed and to instill proper values in them.

Punishment involves inflicting physical or emotional pain when someone does something wrong. If your parents slapped or verbally abused you when you did something wrong, they punished you in an attempt to teach you right from wrong. The problem with punishing children is that it rarely works. Punishment causes parents and children to become disconnected, which increases the chance that children will engage in risky behavior. When parents punish their children (which should be rarely), parents should use a system of effective punishments and rewards.



“... they should never discipline with physical or verbal violence, because it can lead children toward anti-social and delinquent behavior.”

The bottom line is that parents don't need to punish their children to teach discipline. And they should never discipline with physical or verbal violence, because it can lead children toward anti-social and delinquent behavior. In helping parents learn how to discipline properly, teach them to restore the relationship with their children after they discipline them. Children need to know that they are forgiven for what they've done, and that their parents love them unconditionally.

Help mothers explore the impact that the discipline and punishment they received from their parents (or mother or father figures) affects how they discipline. Ask them how their parents disciplined and punished, and the ratio of the two used by both parents. Point out which techniques were good ones and poor ones. Help them identify the good and poor techniques of discipline and punishment they also use with their children. Ask questions about their knowledge of effective techniques for discipline and punishment. Challenge mothers when they use ineffective or harmful techniques.

Emphasize to mothers that raising healthy children also involves learning how to practice self-discipline. When parents tell children to do one thing and the parents do just the opposite, it sends the message to children that parents really don't mean what they say. Children pick up on even simple things, like making the bed. If parents tell their children to make the children's beds in the morning and the parents don't make their own, what does that say to their children about the value of keeping a tidy home?

When discussing self-discipline, you might discover, or at least get an indication, that a mother has a serious addiction, such as smoking, alcoholism, or drug addiction. Be prepared for this possibility by having a list of individuals or organizations that the mother can turn to for help.

Clearly, mothers and fathers must agree on how to effectively coordinate and carry out the discipline of their children. The question is how to accomplish those two intertwined tasks. The first step is to encourage mothers to talk with the father of their children. While that step might seem obvious, it can be a challenge to accomplish. If a mother is unwilling or cannot for some other reason talk with the father about this issue, she and the father won't be able to effectively coordinate and carry out the discipline of their children.

When mothers are willing and able to coordinate the discipline of their children with the father, help mothers explore the similarities and differences in the ways that they and the father discipline and punish their children, and the ratio of discipline to punishment used by each of them. Identifying the similarities and differences will help mothers know which areas of discipline and punishment to work on with the father for better coordination (i.e. the differences). Help mothers identify the good and poor techniques used by the father, and remind mothers of their own good and poor techniques you already discussed with them. This knowledge will help mothers to identify the aspects of discipline and punishment they both need to improve.

Encourage mothers to talk with the father about the conditions under which each of them will take primary responsibility for discipline. If the parents don't live together, for example, they should agree about their roles in discipline when the children are in the care of the other parent (e.g. whoever the children are with disciplines the children), and that both parents will

reinforce/support the discipline put in place by the other parent. It's okay if one or the other parent assumes the role of primary disciplinarian regardless of condition, as long as both parents agree to that parent's role. To guard against ambiguity, consider recommending to mothers that they put their agreements with the father in writing.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers learn that they must first address how they discipline and punish their children before they can coordinate discipline with the father.

Mothers learn the difference between discipline and punishment.

Discipline comes from a Latin word “discipulus,” which means “to teach and to guide.” The follower of a teacher is called a “disciple.” Children are the disciples of their parents. A disciple practices what is or was taught by their teacher.

Mothers increase their awareness of how the way in which their parents disciplined and punished them affects how they discipline and punish their own children.

Mothers identify the differences in how they and the father of their children see disciplining and punishing their children, and the impact of those differences on their children.

Mothers might be generally aware of the differences, but they might not have spent time identifying/clarifying those differences. Getting specific about those differences is a necessary step to identifying how the differences impact their children.

Mothers raise their awareness of how often they and the father of their children rely on discipline versus punishment.

Identifying this ratio can be an eye-opener for mothers, especially in regard to their own reliance on punishment.

Mothers learn it's vital that they and the father of their children agree they must discipline their children whenever possible and use punishment only as a last resort.

Mothers learn it's vital that they and the father of their children agree on how and when to discipline and punish their children.

Getting on the same page with the father will do wonders for their children and for the relationship between a mother and father.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- Do I understand the difference between discipline and punishment?
- How does the way in which my mother disciplined me affect how I discipline my children?
How does the way in which my father disciplined me affect how I discipline my children?
- Did my mother rely more often on punishment than discipline? Did my father rely more often on punishment than discipline?
- How do the father of my children and I see disciplining our children in similar ways?
- What differences do the father of my children and I have in how we discipline our children?
How great are those differences? What problems do those differences create? How do those differences affect our children?
- How alike are the father of my children and I in relying on discipline versus punishment when it comes to teaching our children lessons? Who primarily disciplines our children?
Who primarily punishes our children?
- What can the father of my children and I do to agree on how and when to discipline our children and how and when to punish them as a last resort? How can we better support each other in our roles in disciplining and punishing our children?

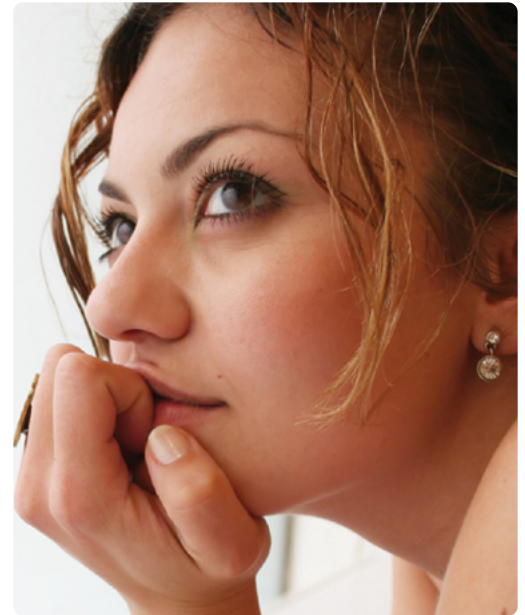
*To listen
is to pay
attention
to or
concentrate
on sound.*

Topic 14: Listening

Background

Helping mothers to listen to the father of their children can be challenging regardless of the quality of the relationship between a mother and father, but it is especially challenging when the relationship is a poor one.

Listening does not come naturally to many people. It is a skill that people must learn, just as they learn to ride a bike, cook, or use a software program with proficiency. Developing this skill starts with understanding the difference between to listen and to hear. To **hear** is the ability to perceive or sense sound. To **listen** is to pay attention to or concentrate on sound. The difference is paying attention to or concentrating on what a person hears—that's listening.



One of the challenges that mothers face is to effectively listen without immediately trying to share their views/opinions about the issues that they discuss with the father of their children. They often come into conversations determined to share their views and determined that those views are always the “right” ones. As a result, they often hear but fail to listen to the father’s point of view/opinion. When they don’t listen to the father of their children, they actually place solving issues at risk. In other words, when they rush to offer their own view, they basically run over the father and don’t listen to his point of view.

When mothers don’t listen to the father’s point of view, they often do three things:

- **Criticize the father.** The mother attacks the father as a person or attacks his point of view without really listening to it. She has her mind made up about what he wants before he shares it.
- **Give the father advice.** The mother tells the father what he should think or do, even though he doesn’t ask for that advice. The mother has her solution in mind even before she talks with the father. She rushes to a solution.
- **Talk about herself.** The mother focuses only on what she wants and doesn’t listen to what the father wants. No matter what he shares, she relates it back to herself. She doesn’t listen because she’s selfish in this situation.

Some mothers don’t realize that it is their job to help the father share his view. They don’t understand that if they want the father to be open to their point of view, they must extend an olive branch and take the high ground by encouraging him to share his view first.

Some mothers don't realize that it is their job to help the father share his view.

When working with mothers on this issue, help them understand the difference between to hear and to listen. After they understand the difference, help them raise their awareness of how well they listen to the father of their children. One way to do that is to ask them how often they ask the father for his view first—and actually consider it—and share their view only after they listen to and consider his.

Help mothers raise their awareness about how often they criticize the father, give him unsolicited advice, and focus on themselves and what they want rather than listen to the father. Challenge them on how they can reduce the amount of criticism and advice giving, and listen to him more often while reducing the focus on their own wants.

Help mothers to become comfortable with the notion that if they want the father to be open to their point of view, they must be willing to listen to his view first before sharing their own. Encourage them to use the easiest way to get the father to share his view first: to ask him for his view. Tell them to ask the father questions or make statements that will draw out his view, such as: “What do you think?”; “What is your view on this?”; “Do you have a different view?”; “I really want to hear your thoughts.”; and “Don’t worry about my feelings. Please share your view.”

Help mothers learn how to share their view with the father in a calm, confident, compassionate manner. To remain calm, a mother must not allow what the father says or does to control how she feels. To be confident, a mother must believe in her view and state it in a firm but not loud voice. To be compassionate, a mother must care about his view—what he thinks and feels—even when she doesn’t agree with it.

Finally, help mothers learn to “focus on acts and facts” when responding to the father’s view and sharing their own view. A focus on acts and facts avoids the land mine of a mother talking about what she thinks the father thinks or feels (e.g. “You don’t respect me”, “You don’t agree with how I discipline our children, and “You think you’re so much better than me.”). When she talks about what he thinks or feels—without the father telling the mother what he thinks and feels—she might create an environment in which he feels attacked or insulted. When he feels attacked or insulted, he may start to argue with her, and the conversation escalates from there.

Acts are what a person says or does. They’re out in the open and are hard to argue against. An act is a fact. If someone says or does something, it’s a fact that they said it or did it. Facts are hard to question—that’s why they’re facts. Facts make a mother’s view easier for a father to believe and agree with. Facts don’t insult. The father might not react well when the mother states the facts, but it is much less likely to come across as an attack or insult.

Basic Learning Objectives

Mothers learn the difference between listening and hearing.

Without this basic knowledge, it’s difficult for mothers to learn how to listen.

Mothers raise their awareness of how well they listen to the father of their children.

Mothers often think they listen to him, but when challenged to examine whether they do, they often learn they don’t listen to him.

Mothers raise their awareness of the things they do that prevent them from listening to the father of their children, such as criticizing him, giving him advice when he doesn't ask for it, and focusing on themselves when the father shares.

When mothers criticize, give unsolicited advice, and focus on themselves to such an extent that they don't listen to the father's view, they commit a selfish act. When they avoid doing these three things, they become a more compassionate person.

Mothers learn that, to better listen, they should encourage the father to share his views before the mother shares her own.

Mothers learn to share their views in a calm, confident, compassionate manner.

When mothers are able to do this consistently, it can make a world of difference in their ability to effectively communicate with the father.

Mothers learn to focus on acts and facts when sharing their view.




This focus doesn't come naturally to many mothers. Learning to focus on acts and facts can be difficult for mothers who tend to let their emotions lead them when they talk with the father.

Basic Questions for Mothers

- Do I understand the difference between listening and hearing?
- How well do I listen to the father of my children? What can I do to better listen to him?
- How often do I criticize the father of my children? What can I do to criticize him less often?
- How often do I give the father of my children advice when he doesn't ask for it? What can I do to give him advice only when he asks for it?
- When listening to the father of my children, do I tend to focus on what I want rather than on what he wants? Do I tend to relate what he says to myself, such as the impact of what he says on me?
- When the father of my children and I have an issue or problem to solve between us or with our children, do I tend to let him state his view first or do I state my view first? What can I do to get his view first more often?
- Do I agree that it is part of my role as a mother to help the father of my children communicate his views on our relationship and on how to raise our children? If not, why do I disagree?
- When I share my view with the father of my children, do I do so in a calm, confident, compassionate manner? What can I do to share my view in a calm, confident, compassionate manner?
- Do I focus on acts and facts when I talk with the father of my children, or do I tend to let my emotions lead me when I talk with him? What can I do to focus more on acts and facts? How will focusing more on acts and facts help me when I talk with him?

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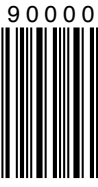
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