

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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CONNECTICUT
FATHERHOOD
INITIATIVE

Winter Edition

This Issue's Focus:
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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Partnering With Family Men: Why and How

Message from Our Network

Founder & Director of Real Dads Forever, Doug Edwards

“It has been my great pleasure to be a member and partner of the Advisory Council of the Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative since its inception in 1999. The memorandums of understanding developed and executed between the Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative and our State Agencies have ensured the continuity of the work of serving fathers. Having worked directly with fathers in groups and with many of our state and nonprofit family service agencies, I have seen so much progress. In this issue of the newsletter, we will highlight some of the work that has been done and look at what the future may hold. State agencies, educational institutions, and the nonprofit family-serving sector have been inspired by the mission of CFI and continue to make effective system changes. While intervention is still essential, let’s look at the opportunities for agencies and fathers to do critical prevention work. Yes, fathers are a catalyst for prevention.”

A Few of the Agencies, Colleges, and Schools with which Real Dads Forever has worked:

Agencies:

Connecticut Departments of Public Health, Social Services, Children and Families, Mental Health & Addiction Services, Correction and Education; Office of Early Childhood; Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division; CT Education Association; West Hartford Education Association; New Haven and Hartford Healthy Starts; Wheeler Clinic; Yale Child Study Center; Hartford Foundation for Public Giving; ECHN Family Development Center; City of Hartford; Village for Families and Children; Community Partners in Action

Colleges:

Eastern CT State University; University of CT and University of St. Joseph Schools of Social Work; Manchester, Asnuntuck and Housatonic Community Colleges; Connecticut College

Public Schools:

Manchester; East Hartford; Vernon; Hartford; West Hartford; Bloomfield; Windsor; Enfield; Meriden; Waterbury; Danbury;

Working Across Systems

Preventive intervention and collaboration across systems have been core aspirations of the Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative (CFI). Best outcomes are achieved when providers learn from and work seamlessly across systems critical to the varied needs of parents who struggle with limited means.

Our CFI Winter Newsletter continues to lift the collaborative efforts of CFI partners who improve the chance for men to develop relationships in their children's lives. In this issue, we focus on one enterprising practitioner, Doug Edwards of Real Dads Forever, who, since 1995, has found success in changing unfavorable conditions and limited-service options available to men who father. With practical, down-to-earth illustrations, Doug's wisdom permeates his work with dads, State and Federal level agency leadership, service practitioners, and administrative systems in Connecticut and nationwide.

Through RDF Fatherhood Programs, Doug guides men to examine and understand the impact of their individual history and how to build the knowledge and skills to make them better parents and partners.

Doug Edwards has conducted "Father Friendly Site Assessments" to lead agencies through an in-depth examination of their approach, policies, practices, and physical environment that male customers experience when using services.

Edwards is widely sought for Staff Training covering topics from paternal prenatal early attachment to paternal bereavement. Practitioners meeting needs in childcare, healthcare, education, corrections, and every part of the family life cycle learn to appreciate the "influential presence" of those parents too often assumed to be "absent." They learn how to attract, engage, enable, and support men to be part of a balanced family equation.

CFI Newsletter editors interviewed Doug about how he got started in this field and the progress he's observed through his years of experience, where he sees improvement and finds hope for the future.

Changes at Prison

Over the last 20 years, Doug Edwards has visited almost all the state's prisons. When he started, they had very strict protocols about what was allowed. He could not show videos or use music. Proposals put forward were greeted with common refrains: "No," "We can't," and "You can't do that." A few months ago, Doug traveled to Manson Youth Institution in Cheshire, a prison for young men between 15 and 20, to discuss what he might do with men in the young father's program. A scheduled meeting included the supervisor of counseling, the deputy warden, and several counselors. In our interview, Doug recounts how intently they listened as he talked about the program, showing empathy and understanding. He figured he might as well ask for as much as possible. "What I would like to do at the end is have a graduation and have the young men's parents, their partners, and their babies come to this graduation. What I've done in the past is to have the men write up promises. Then, at graduation, they would stand up, face their family, and, in unison, repeat the promises. These are promises to themselves, promises to their children, promises to their partners, and promises to their community." "Before I got the words out, the warden said, "DONE. IT'S DONE!!" After class completion and at the graduation ceremony, corrections officers and counselors were in attendance with a representative from the Office of Early Childhood, who gave the men books, asking them to write a message to their child in the books. Those messages were so soft and sweet, and it was just delightful. They came full circle out from under their armor and, as a dad, connected with their children.

Did You Know

- It's important to understand father-child relationships as part of entire family systems. Fathers are important to children's well-being.
- Children whose fathers provide them with learning materials and speak with them frequently perform better in school and have more advanced language skills.
- If no father is involved, other caregivers can also serve those functions. Family structure is less important than having loving caregivers meeting children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social needs.
- A supportive relationship between parents is linked to better self-regulation in a child. Regardless of whether they live together, children who have regular positive contact with their father tend to regulate their emotions better than children who have no contact with their father.
- Countries such as Norway and Sweden attempt to engage fathers and mothers equally in caregiving by providing paternal as well as maternal leave.

[Source: Excerpted from Jennifer E. Lansford, Ph. Psychology Today (June 15, 2021)]

A Practice-Changing Reaction to Father Engagement Training

What Early Head Start Teachers said about the Impact of Professional Development

- "It was not until these issues were addressed and discussed during weekly staff development that my outlook on fatherhood began to change. The staff development was focused on the meaning of fatherhood and the important roles that fathers play in the lives of their young children."
- "The training and meaningful discussion with my colleagues changed how I saw fathers. It gave me a safe environment to tap into deep emotions that caused me to disregard fathers. With the support of my coach, I thought long and hard about my own negative past experiences. As I continued to reflect, I developed new strategies to effectively serve both mothers and fathers."

Highlighted Program

Reframing WIC to be More Father-Friendly

"In 2019, we began our "Fostering Fatherhood Involvement in Connecticut" WIC Project in partnership with Doug Edwards from Real Dads Forever. The goal of our project is to increase engagement with dads and family men so that, ultimately, we provide more family-centered service to the Connecticut families we serve. "

"At the state agency level, we have been more thoughtful about including images of and or messages specifically for dads in our social media efforts. We've also developed nutrition education materials for dads focused on infant feeding and keeping their children healthy. We've made posters with positive images of dads available to all of our local agencies, and we've created a welcome to WIC gift bag specific to dads, including board books to encourage reading and beach balls for active play. These are just a few small efforts to make dads feel welcome and to encourage participation in all aspects of WIC. We've also encouraged local agencies to strengthen their partnerships with fatherhood advocate programs in their service areas. This allows WIC to offer referrals to dads and family men who participate in the WIC program and for their fatherhood programs to encourage dads to become more involved in WIC services for their families. The relationships between WIC and local fatherhood programs have really flourished, especially in our pilot sites. Local WIC offices are meeting regularly with fatherhood advocates to strengthen further collaborations, including piloting a breastfeeding boot camp for dads. "

"We are hopeful that this work will continue and that all excites in Connecticut will be viewed as more father-friendly. By ensuring that our staff effectively engage with dads and encourage participation at all levels, we ensure that our WIC families and, ultimately, our WIC children have everything they need to grow healthy and strong."

Video excerpt from Amy Botello, RD, CLC, Nutrition Consultant II, WIC Program

WIC Staff Comments about Professional Development

- "Motivates me to make extra efforts to welcome dad at the WIC office."
- "I will be more sensitive and aware to make sure to bring dad up in my conversations at our appointments."
- "I will change my approach to the fathers and look for new ways to bring them some information."
- "The portion on marketing, recruiting, and retention was very helpful. I learned new ways to try to engage dads in programming."
- "Statistics, the attachment material, ideas for bringing this work back to staff."

CFI Partners

CT Departments of:

- Social Services
 - Children and Families
 - Correction
 - Developmental Services
 - Education
 - Housing
 - Labor
 - Mental Health and Addiction Services
 - Public Health
 - Veterans Affairs
- and**
- Office of Early Childhood
 - Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division, Support Enforcement Services, and Family Support Magistrate Division
 - Board of Pardons and Parole
 - Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity
 - CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence
 - CT State Colleges and Universities
 - United Way of CT
 - Legal services, researchers, and numerous community-based, family, and youth-serving providers.

Pat Wilson Pheanious Interviews Doug Edwards:

Doug's collaborative spirit and positive outlook on families are homegrown.

"My dad... was a real leader and a teacher, but he was also a friend; he was a good husband. I saw my mom and dad operate outside the family with kindness and generosity, giving me the tools I needed."

Building empathy and making amends with the past is important for both men and women in his program.

"I do with them what I call 'backing into empathy' using third-party strategies using video, poetry, and music. Guys critique and explore, and before too long, they realize, "Aha, this is about me." They begin to develop a sense of empathy and understanding about that spot within themselves that's sensitive and vulnerable in order to connect with their child."

We asked Doug about opportunities for growth in our field.

"Our greatest opportunities are in prevention. We need to get out front and invite families in during the pregnancy. That seems to me to be the golden opportunity. A baby is growing — so issues include fetal development, navigating hormones—and developing relationships with mom that emphasize grace, care, and empathy. These issues create an opportunity at a time when men are curious and they want to be there.

They want to be involved, doing a job. This is our chance to help them."

Reducing maternal and infant mortality was also cited as a critical need.

"Dads who are present can be that 'Canary in the coal mine' to see things and alert doctors. Dads can be the eyes and ears that feel when there's something wrong with mom or baby and when help is needed right away."

Men in the care of the Department of Correction.

"I know all of them have something in there. It comes naturally from birth—that connection, potential attachment, love, and relationship. And then, as we grow up, all around us, we hear, "Be a man, stand tall, don't cry, fix your face." Those kinds of messages help us detach from the soft human interconnectedness we all have inside. I want them to find that spot. If I can reach it, they can reach it, also. And when they do, they can reach their children."

For additional program details and to view the full interview visit the Real Dads Forever website at www.realdadsforever.org

We Want to Hear From You!!!

Let us know what you would like to see in upcoming newsletters!

Email us at: anthony.judkins@ct.gov

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