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Single father parenting/peer support group

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Single Father Parenting/Peer Support Group

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Abstract

Single fathers in society lack community resources to help them raise their children. Single fathers who have custody of their children take on the role as primary parent and need services. Through peer/support groups, they gain knowledge and skills to become successful parents.

Executive Summary

For the past year, I did my interning at Community Solutions in Santa Clara County. Community Solutions has offices in Gilroy and Morgan Hill. Services available from South Santa Clara County to San Benito County. The main office where services are available is located in Gilroy. It employs over 100 people from different programs and services within the community. The agency has been providing services in the community for over thirty-five years, such as mental health services, court and community referred services, and services for families.

For the purpose of this project I focused on single fathers in the community and the lack of services offered to them throughout the community. The United States Census Bureau claims there are 2 million single fathers in the United States (p.1). Many single fathers do not know how to utilize services within their community.

In order to determine what services should be offered to help single fathers in the community I conducted a peer support group designed especially to help single fathers. I designed a curriculum specifically for single fathers to offer them support and resources with raising their children alone. Topics included healthy and nutritious meals, self-esteem, positive discipline, father's roles, other resources, and raising teen-age daughters and sons.

Through conducting single father support group I found that many single fathers needed resources for raising their children, and benefited from the support of other single fathers. My recommendations are for there to be more services offered within the community to single fathers. More communication with family court services should be offered because many single fathers do not know there are classes offered to support them when raising their children alone. More education is needed within the community to help single fathers with parenting skills.

Description of the Agency

Community Solutions is a private non-profit agency committed to serving the South Santa Clara County and the areas that surround the county. The agency was established in 1972 as a teen drop in center staffing approximately five people. Thirty-six years later since the start, Community Solutions expanded to serve South San Jose, and San Benito County.

Community Solutions Mission Statement is:

To provide services and programs that improves the quality of life in our community. We are dedicated to developing the full potential and personal responsibility of individuals, families and the community at large (General, n.d.).

Community Solutions' organizational structure begins with the Board of Directors which includes the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Human Resources, a Clinical Director, Chief Operations Officer, Resource Development Director, program directors for each program, and case managers. It is important for Community Solutions to have each of these positions because it keeps a balance of power. Every person employed by Community Solutions plays an extrinsic role in the development of programs and services within the community.

Community Solutions offers a variety of services for the community they serve. Services provided include, but are not limited to, mental health, educational, recreational, housing, youth support, and safety. Each program Community Solutions offers to the community is designed to align with one or more of the services they offer. In fact, when they design a new program they must incorporate the services they offer into the program. For example, their self-defense classes incorporate the safety service.

The services offered through Community Solutions are separated into programs for: Family and Children, Adult and Older Adult Care. Other services available are Court and Community Referred. The Mental Health Services include System of Care programs, and La Casa del Puente Transitional Residential programs. The Youth Support Services include Restorative Justice Program, Family Advocacy Program, Truancy Reduction, Status Offender Services, and the

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Independent Living Program. Programs designed to help members in the community, who are involved in violent situations include La Isla Women's Shelter, Domestic Violence Counseling, Domestic Violence Legal Advocacy, Domestic Violence Prevention, Sexual Assault Program, Child Abuse Prevention, and Teen Assault Awareness. Each program includes a program director, case manager, and some have coordinators, therapists, program specialists, volunteers, and interns.

Description of the Challenge

A challenge within the community that has been identified is single fathers raising their children. Some of the challenges of single fathers include, but are not limited to: lack of services, miss judged, and discrimination because of societal norms; mothers have custody of their children, not fathers. In our society, men are judged as the breadwinner not the emotional supporter and often they lack the parenting skills because they were never taught how to be nurturing. Fathers want the same chance to care for their children and when granted custody, for whatever reason, they are grateful for the chance to raise their children. Unfortunately, when single fathers go into the community to receive services they are often turned away. When they receive services, they are uncomfortable because all the people receiving services are single mothers. For example, in parenting class I have observed that the curriculum focuses on mother's needs and when fathers enter the class, some become uncomfortable because the issues are geared towards women and their children.

Population Characteristics

The United States Census Bureau claims there were 2 million single fathers in 2000, a 70 percent increase since the 1970 census. Roughly, 200,000 raised three or more children under the age of 18. 196,000 men solely raised infants under the age of one. The 2000 census also states, "913,000 single fathers were divorced; 693,000 had never married; 350,000 were married to an

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absent spouse; and 88,000 were widowed” (p.1). These numbers show a drastic increase and experts are claiming the number will increase, as society changes towards believing fathers having sole custody are acceptable. Fathers are willing to take care of their children without a spouse and statistics prove it.

The U.S. Census Bureau also claim 27 percent of single fathers have a yearly income of at least \$50,000, and 14 percent live in someone else’s residence (Single, 2007). Poverty rates for single fathers are not as high as single mothers in California. According to Public Policy Institute of California (2006), “Poverty rates are higher for children living...with a single father (23 percent)...than for those living in married-couple families (12 percent)” (p.1).

What led me to believe that this is a challenge?

During my first few months at Community Solutions, I went with a case manager to the parenting classes and co-facilitated the classes with her. During these, parenting classes the single fathers within the group claimed they did not feel comfortable because they do not see the classes pertaining to what they are experiencing with their children. For example, single fathers having a positive relationship with their daughters. Some single fathers do not have the skills or knowledge of how to help their daughters with self-esteem, the transition to the teenage years, including puberty, and dating. The single fathers in the parenting classes would like to see more attention towards these types of issues. According to one single father client of Community Solutions

All services are designed to help women and their children. When I come to these meetings, I wish they were geared to what I was experiencing with my thirteen-year-old daughter. I do not understand what she is experiencing at that age because I was never a teenage female. I do not have anyone to talk to about these issues. It would be nice to have a group of single fathers to discuss issues we are going through (Personal Communication, 2/12/2008).

Together with two case managers, my mentor, and myself we concluded these problems warrant representation within the agency. Five single fathers attend the parenting classes and want

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the information to help them become successful parents, the same, as we want mothers to be successful. Furthermore, Community Solutions wants fathers and mothers to feel equally comfortable. During one parenting class, I noticed some of the material Community Solutions used-reiterates the need for a change in societal views of single fathers. For example, some of the material states, “she” and I noticed the two fathers in the class were uncomfortable with this and one stated, “This is not right, we are parents too.” Looking through the curriculum already designed for the parenting classes I estimate 3 out of 10 pamphlets/handouts I passed out were geared towards single mothers. Through conversations with the case manager, we decided this was an issue; both genders deserved equal treatment during parenting classes because more men are raising their children on their own.

Literature Review

In the United States, single fathers are becoming more common because of divorce, the death of their spouse, an increase of joint custody, and lessening of court bias towards fathers. According to Ohio State University, Extension Agent, Kirk Bloir (n.d.), “Single, custodial fathers are men who have accepted the primary responsibility of rearing their children (having sole custody a minimum of 5 days a week, on average)” (p. 1). Furthermore, authors of *Effects of Parent’s Gender, Child’s Gender, and Parental Involvement on the Academic Achievement of Adolescents in Single Parent Families*, Lee, Kushner and Cho (2007) define single parents as, “A parent with one or more children, who is currently neither married, nor living together with his or her partner” (p.152). Single fathers have the same definition as single mothers. Predominantly mothers are often seen as the single parents, but this is changing as gender roles shift.

The roles for fathers change drastically when they become the primary parent. Often, in two parent families the male is the breadwinner of the family. His main responsibility is to take

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care of the family financially. When the father becomes the sole parent, his role changes to the nurturer. This is problematic because men were not raised to be the nurturer. Burgess (1988), author of *The Single-Again Man* states, “Caring for children by a single-parent father can be difficult primarily because he may not have been conditioned for the parenting role” (p. 72). Growing up, boys watch their mothers do all the nurturing; because of this, they do not learn the skills it takes to be the nurturer. This does not mean they cannot be nurturers; it is just harder for them to be in that role.

Fathers who all of a sudden become the sole provider for their children frequently show stress related to the transition of being the only parent. Stressors include lack of confidence required to be a single parent, the change in their economic status, having to adjust to their new lifestyle and feeling inadequate to take on the responsibility. Furthermore, because typically the mother does all the communication with the children and when the role shifts, it is difficult for the father. Fathers rarely communicated with their children beyond the normal pleasantries; they find it very difficult to suddenly be put in the position of the communicator and they often have anxiety towards the task. Thus, lack of efficacy in communication adds to the difficulties of being a single father. In conclusion, single fathers are not sure they can be successful parents on their own.

Many single fathers face the same issues as single mothers. Some of the issues single fathers face, that are different, while raising their children are raising girls and helping them work through their issues and social support. According to Lori Kelch (1997), author of *The Effects of Single Parenting on Father and Child*, “Single fathers have one problem single mothers do not have, society...they have to prove to society that they can rear their children alone” (p.2). Furthermore, the fathers do not know how and where to access the services for their children, and when they do have access to the programs the programs are geared towards single mothers making

the fathers uncomfortable. The social system is set up primarily to help single mothers. One program is “Women, Infants, and Children, (WIC) which is a special supplemental food and nutrition program for women, infants, and children under age five”. (Women, n.d). One father stated in the parenting class, “I thought WIC was only to help single mothers” (Personal Communication, April 16, 2008). When there is a problem with accessing services for single fathers, it can affect how the parent raises the children. There needs to be more awareness of the problems single fathers face on a daily basis.

Access to childcare for their children while at work is probably the most common issue for single fathers. Men perceive themselves as the breadwinners. They have the need to be successful at work and when they have to leave early or miss work because of lack of childcare they feel they are not living up to the standards society has placed upon them (Ingram, 2006). Since the beginning of family, the man is seen as the one who should provide for the family. Family has changed drastically since the days of “Ozzie and Harriet” and fathers are much more involved in raising their children. When there is a lack of childcare they cannot provide financially, which brings self-esteem problems for the fathers. According to Patreese D. Ingram (2006) a State Extension Specialist for Penn State, “Many men feel they are judged, as well as judge themselves, by their success at work. This often leads to strong internal conflicts over the amount of time they devote to their children (p. 2)”. Ingram goes on to state, “Arriving late or leaving early, missing work, and having to reduce work and work-related travel cause stress” (p. 2). Single fathers are most worried about childcare for their children ages 5 to 11 years old (Bloir, K., n.d.). Fathers are not comfortable leaving their children home alone and fathers are unaware of what programs are available for assistance with childcare expenses. Unfortunately, often the fathers do not even know how to access the help. Besides childcare, single fathers, face many challenges raising their

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daughters.

Single fathers raising girls face many challenges. These challenges include helping their daughters through puberty, dating, and having high self-esteem. They “Struggle with establishing and being comfortable with an appropriate level of intimacy, especially with their adolescent daughters” (Bloir,K., n.d). Daughters need their mothers but when that is not possible, the fathers are responsible to ensure their daughters receive the support they need. For single fathers this is often hard for them. It is important for fathers to learn all they can about raising young girls when they are doing it alone. Mike Clump (2003), author of *The Single Dad’s Survival Guide*, recommends single fathers talk to women they trust and talk with them about topics that might help them communicate with their daughters. (p. 57). These topics include feminine hygiene, clothing preferences, emotional differences, and physical differences. There will come a time when their daughter will need to start wearing bras. It is important for single fathers to have a female friend or relative on hand to take the daughter for a fitting for the correct bra. Many men do not feel comfortable with this, so having a female person who can help is important. It shows their daughter that they care about them enough to ask for help (p. 58).

Single fathers face many of the same challenges single mothers face. The difference is single fathers have rarely had to take on this particular role. Transitioning into this new role of having all the responsibility of a father and mother is difficult for them, because it is something they have not had to do. The single fathers in the parenting class are willing to take on responsibilities and even welcome it. They want the same resources available to single mothers to be available for single fathers.

Project Description:

For my project I planned and implemented a six week single father parenting/peer support

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group within South Santa Clara County, specifically Morgan Hill and Gilroy. Each session focused on a different topic such as, children's self-esteem, discipline, health issues, and the importance of having a relationship with their children's school, raising female teenagers, and dating. Through these weekly sessions, I observed and evaluated improvements of the single fathers' knowledge, attitudes, and skills towards their responsibility of raising children without a partner. In addition, I discussed resources available to single fathers in the community, such as, emergency assistance resources, Women, Infant, and Children (WIC), Employment Development Department (EDD), and childcare. These are all resources some single fathers did not know were available to them.

Methods

For this project, I collaborated with my field mentor, the caseworker, the program director at Community Solutions, and Mexican American Community Services Agency (MACSA). Collaborating with all these individuals helped me gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to facilitate the project.

Analyzing the data, using Micro Soft Excel, collected through the pre and post-tests insured the outcomes were met when the project was completed. The pre-test was given at the beginning of the first session, while the post-test was given on the last day of the sessions. The tests included both qualitative and quantitative data. Analyzing the data was an important aspect of the project because it showed the ending results of the project.

Major Learning Outcomes

This Capstone Project exhibits evidence of the knowledge, skills, and attitude I gained in the course of my schooling at CSUMB.

Leadership: This is evident throughout the project with the student's ability to gather people

together who come from different backgrounds for the single father parent/peer group. It is also evident in the student's ability to keep the participants engaged throughout the presentations.

Collaboration: This is apparent throughout the project with the student's ability to work with Mexican American Community Services Agency (MACSA) and the mentor at Community Solutions. The student also used this major learning outcome to bring single fathers together to work collaboratively through their issues they had being a single parent with little or no resources available for them.

Information Management: This is evident with the student's ability to produce a professional manual for the group facilitator to use during the parenting classes/peer group. The binder included valuable resources available for the participants. Furthermore, the student showed the ability to present a professional presentation using Microsoft PowerPoint for her Capstone presentation to the community.

Personal and Professional Communication: The student displayed knowledge of this major learning outcome through her ability to communicate professionally, not only orally, but also in written correspondences. This was a major part of the project because the student had to communicate the importance of the project for the community.

University Vision Statement

The California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB), as an organization has a diverse vision, which targets all, no matter their socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnicity. The Vision Statement also incorporates the use of collaboration, leadership, and financial administration to serve within the community. CSUMB is proud to serve the underprivileged and underserved, and sees it as their responsibility to give back to the community they serve. This Capstone Project incorporates the Vision Statement of CSUMB by serving single fathers, who are underserved, in

South Santa Clara County. The project also integrates collaboration and leadership through getting the community involved with the issues single fathers face in their daily lives.

Project Evaluation

Through this project, I worked on a six-week curriculum for the agency to have when working with single fathers. I designed an extensive curriculum with an outline and weekly session handouts for the agency to give to group members who participate in the single fathers groups. All of these resources will stay with the agency after I am done with my project.

Through working with the single fathers in my six-week group I observed these fathers need a lot of support and resources while raising their children. I learned they want to be successful parents but lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed. Through the group, I helped them see they are not alone and there are resources available to them. I learned they have the ability to work with their children on communication, healthy choices, positive self-esteem, and discipline. These fathers taught me the importance of having peer groups and taught me how to facilitate a group, even when the participants did not know what to expect.

Some recommendations I have is for there to be an adjustment on the curriculum. These changes include having more resources for parents who are raising young children. It is important to include all the stages of children, and not only teenagers, which is what I focused on for one of the topics. Community Solutions should keep this in mind before they implement another group of single fathers.

Three other recommendations I have for Community Solutions is have an expert on nutrition come into the class when it is the week covering nutrition. Since the facilitator is not an expert on this topic, it would be a good idea, to have someone who is to help these fathers understand the importance of proper nutrition. Having someone come into the peer group gives

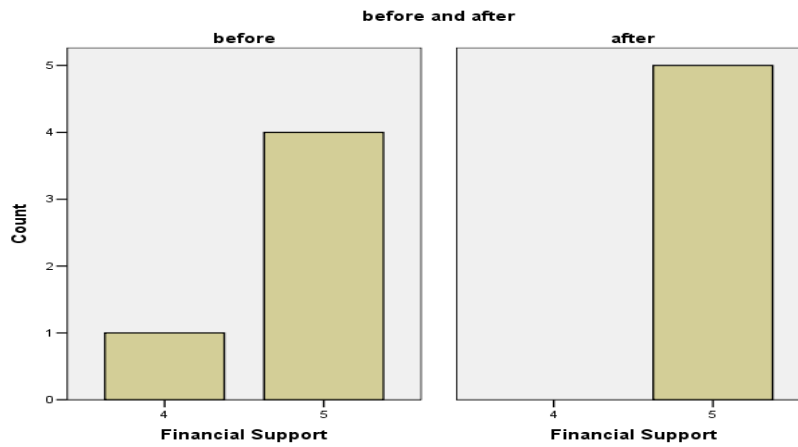
the fathers access to someone who can give those hands on experience and answer questions the facilitator would not know. Collaborate with judges so they can help get the word out in the community that there are single fathers parenting/support groups. Sometimes when fathers are granted sole custody of their children, the judge will feel it is the best interest of the children for the father to attend classes to help learn the proper skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to raise their children successfully. Last and foremost continue to hold the single fathers group and mentor the fathers. Advertise with other agencies in the community who help families.

Findings

Fathers were excited about the parenting/support sessions. One father stated, “He looked forward to coming to the groups because he felt a connection between the fathers” (J. Martin*, Personal Communication, August 14, 2008).

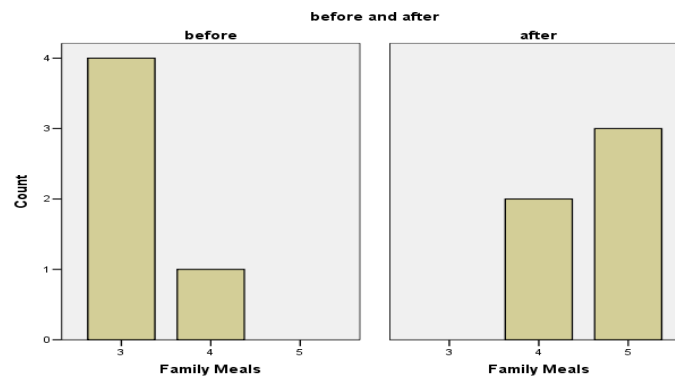
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Graph 1
Financial and Emotional Support



After completing the pre/post test one of my findings is the father's view changed towards the question relating to emotional and financial support. Out of five fathers, one father was not completely sure fathers play an important role in their children's emotional and financial support. After the six sessions and the post- test were completed, the one father changed his mind and totally agreed; it is an important role for fathers to be there emotionally and financially for their children.

Graph 2
Family Styles Meals



Another question asked on the pre/post test is having family style meals are important for children because they take part in meal preparation and learn about their own independence. The results from the pre-test are five fathers somewhat agreed. After all the sessions and the post-test two fathers somewhat agreed and three fathers completely agreed on how important it is for their children to take part in the meal preparation. The session on family meals helped the three fathers see the importance of family meal preparation. These fathers did not see how their children could become involved in meal preparation and thought their children would be in the way in the kitchen. Having their children, help in the kitchen shows them living skills but also helps the family at the same time.

Conclusion

Giving single custodial fathers a chance to excel with raising their children, by giving them the skills, attitudes, and knowledge. These fathers want to have the chance to make life better for their children. Unfortunately, access is not easily available to parenting classes specifically for single fathers so it is imperative for agencies such as Community Solutions to offer these classes for the single father populations. Agencies in the United States are beginning to realize the need for single father classes and are starting to implement programs. I learned that single fathers need more support and resources from the community so they will not feel left alone. The recommendations I have for Community Solutions is to continue developing single father parenting classes, and collaborate with family court judges to share information regarding resources available.

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