

Life on Mars: Understanding the Culture of Fathers

by J. Michael Hall

In the early 1990s, John Gray wrote a book called *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. I am sure that not everyone agreed with all of John Gray's assertions, but I am sure that from time to time, most of us feel like men and women are from different planets. Those differences sometimes drive us crazy, but it is important to remember that differences can also be strengths.

The differences between men and women make them different as parents. In the past 10 years, schools and organizations like PTA have been more assertive in their efforts to involve fathers. Some programs have been successful, and others have failed miserably. In my experience as a father involvement facilitator, trainer, and speaker, I have found that the programs that work have a solid grasp of these differences and see them as neither positive nor negative.

Treat him like a man

Fathers are men. Men will attend programs, interact, and return for more if a program addresses them as male parents. However, not all men are alike. Not all men like sports or cars. The attempt to make things "manly" instead of masculine leads some PTAs to create programs that are stereotypical and therefore fail to reach all men. Here are some guidelines for creating programs that will attract men:

Make it interactive. Men like programs that are interactive. They want to move and do things. When fathers talk to their children, they typically do so while doing something, such as playing or running errands. Men do not use activities to avoid intimacy;

Don't assume that all fathers are like your own father; each generation offers new perspectives, challenges, and strengths.



Strong Fathers—Strong Families

on the contrary, men communicate in a more intimate fashion *because* they are doing something. Like most fathers, my father did not teach me while sitting in the study having a heart-to-heart discussion. My most memorable life lessons came from my father while driving to and from different tasks. Men not only teach through interactivity, they also learn through interactivity.

Make it relational. When I train female teachers, principals, and PTA members, they frequently tell me that men don't talk and relate to each other. This is not true. What is true is that men do not talk like women. Men can relate well to other men, but in their way and on their terms. The best way to shut down a group of men is to ask them to talk or share. However, if you ask a man what he thinks or what his concerns are about a certain topic, you usually will have difficulty getting him to stop talking!

Don't assume that fathers need to be "bribed" with food or prizes; we come for the kids.

Men form strong relationships within their own contexts, such as on the sports field, the battlefield, or at the workplace. The best way to develop men into leaders at school is not through leader-

ship training, but by having them work together on a service project. By sharing the tasks of recruiting, planning, and execution of a project, leaders develop and a close-knit team of men emerges.

Make it relevant. Fathers tend to be pragmatic and want just the facts. PTA meetings can be fairly maddening for men. Instead of hearing the minutes and finance statement read out loud by leadership, men would rather read them silently and get on with the meeting.

Not only do men want the facts, but they also need to know what to do with those facts. If you can't present facts and action items, do not expect men to attend or participate effectively in a meeting.

Give plenty of notice. The main reason that men do not attend programs planned for them is because they were not informed of them at all or in enough time to arrange to be there. Issue a calendar at least a month before the start of the school year so that dads can plan their work schedule, business trips, and other activities to include your programs. Send a "Save the Date" flier out at least one month in advance of any program you hope fathers will attend.

Make it about the kids. Men do not want or need to be "fixed." If you challenge their competency or scold them for not being more involved, they will not be back. However, if you say you want to help dads help their kids, they will be interested. To engage fathers, focus your programs on child outcomes.

Include the kids. Many programs for moms are designed to give them a break from the kids. Fathers tend to have less time with their children, so include children in your programming for men. Fathers want to spend time with their children that is—you guessed it—interactive, relational, and relevant. Scheduling a dads meeting will attract 10 dads at most. Scheduling a

Don't assume that fathers are not interested. Fathers care deeply about their children and want the best for them.

father-child breakfast with a meeting after their kids go to class will bring in 10 times that number of dads.

An all-inclusive strategy

Don't apologize for including fathers. Your effort to include fathers does not mean that you are placing fathers before mothers. If some of your female members become offended, then they do not get it. Apologizing marginalizes your efforts and the involvement of fathers. Stick to your message.

Don't neglect mothers. Moms have been involved at school for years. If you celebrate every little thing that your dads are doing without also recognizing the steadfast contributions of your moms, you will alienate them. You can enlist the support of moms in providing masculine-based and father-focused programs if you emphasize that PTA is a team dedicated to child welfare and education.

Be flexible in your definition of "father." When you invite fathers, you also need to invite father figures. Almost 5 million grandparents are raising their grandchildren, many children have stepfathers, and some children only have their mother and, hopefully, some male role model in their life, such as an uncle, baseball coach, or clergyman. Stick to your message of father involvement and allow the children to choose to bring their father figure, whoever he may be.

Your father involvement efforts can be very successful. However, if you set your sights too low because you're afraid you can't bring in large numbers of men, then you won't succeed. Expect and plan for success, share your expectations, get all of your members involved in the effort, and fathers *will* show up. **OC**



Strong Fathers-Strong Families

J. Michael Hall, MEd, is a father and the executive director of Strong Fathers-Strong Families. Michael has worked directly with more than 20,000 fathers in schools and Head Start programs around the country. For more about Strong Fathers-Strong Families, go to www.strongfathers.com.