

Group Connection: The Personal Power of Masculine Readers



Parents as Teachers™

By Michael Hall

When most people think about parent-child reading activities, they likely picture a mother quietly reading to her children. Very few people would envision a reading event where fathers and children are acting like donkeys, elephants, and gorillas. That is exactly what happens, however, at a Dad and Kid Reading Night sponsored by Strong Fathers-Strong Families.

Dad and Kid Reading Night encourages and teaches fathers to read to their children. The books are carefully chosen both to reflect the father-child dynamic and to facilitate lively activity.



Suggested Books The most useful books for this type of activity are based on a positive father-child relationship, a set of positive interactions, or both. Here are the books that Strong Fathers-Strong Families has made a standard for this program every time it is presented to dads and kids in schools and Head Start programs.

Head to Toe by Eric Carle

This book is used as a warm-up to get everyone moving and allows the fathers to slowly become a part of the activity. It is also the activity that promotes participants to act like giraffes, buffaloes, donkeys, monkeys, and gorillas.

Guess How Much I Love You by Sam McBratney and Anita Jeram

This book illustrates a loving relationship between father and son nutbrown hares. When used at reading night, it allows for fathers and children to literally show how much they love each other with outstretched arms and legs.

Going on a Bear Hunt by Michael Rosen

This well-known story and song is presented in a beautifully illustrated book encourages fun interaction for dads and kids with lots of predictability and repeating text.

Octopus Hug by Laurence Pringle

This book provides activities for dads and kids to do at home. It has a great story about a dad who stays with the kids while the mom is gone to dinner. Watching a group of fathers all give their kids an “octopus hug” (with eight arms) makes the all the effort you put into the event well worth it.



The strength of interactivity

Interactivity is an integral part of the program because men tend to more easily be engaged through activity and fathers tend to engage kids in more rough-and-tumble play. Researchers say that this rough play can have a powerful positive impact on children, fostering curiosity and teaching them to regulate emotion and enjoy surprises (Pruett, 2000). By using a strengths-based approach with fathers, practitioners can encourage and teach them to spend more time in reading *their way* to their children.

Just as boys and girls are different and men and women are different, we must recognize that mothers and fathers are different (Pruett, 2000; Lamb, 1997; Park, 1995). Fathers and mothers parent differently and interact with their children differently. That difference in parenting styles is also present in how fathers talk to and read to their children. A recent University of North Carolina study found a link between fathers who used varied vocabulary with their 2-year-olds and the children's more advanced speech at age 3, even though the fathers spoke less often to the children than did the mothers. Mothers' vocabulary didn't have a significant impact (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, in press). A study of low-income Early Head Start fathers (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, & Cabrera, 2004) found a link between fathers' stimulating play with their 2-year-olds and better language and cognitive skills in the children a year later, even when controlling for mothers' behavior.

As early as the 1960s, psychologist Ellen Bing found (to her surprise) that children who had fathers who read to them regularly were more likely to do much better in many important cognitive skill categories than children who did not (Bing, 1963). One of the strongest benefits was a substantial increase in a daughter's verbal skills. Telling fathers about these acknowledged paternal strengths can help them understand their own powers as readers.

The strength of relationships

The premise of a Dad and Kid Reading Night is to bring fathers in to experience this power of masculine reading and how it impacts the education of their children. This experience is facilitated by reading to both fathers and children and having them interact with the books that are being read to them.

The event is billed as a "dad and kid" event. Instead of developing catchy titles like "Daddy Read to Me" or "Book Look," the creators of the program used a simple title that helps participants understand that they are invited together to come and interact. By using a title that puts the father and child on an even footing, you can communicate that they both have an important role to play in the process.

The relational aspects of the event are the primary draw to both children and fathers. The relational hook is used as fathers and children are drawn closer and closer together through a series of books that start out on the emotionally "safe" side and then move into more tactile and intimate interactions



like wrestling and hugging. Once the hugging starts, it is usually hard to stop, even among older elementary students. Most fathers are happy to oblige.

Besides taking part in the activities, fathers are also observing other fathers playfully interacting with their children. They are seeing the reaction of their children to both the books and the interplay between them. Therein lies the power of the event. It is not the actual reading of books, it is not the modeling of a masculine style of reading, and it is not the information that is being presented to the fathers during the workshop. Even though those aspects of the program are valuable, it is the interaction with their children during the activity that sells fathers on their personal power as masculine readers.

The strength of outcomes

Even though these events are fun, they must be planned and developed in such a way that they improve children's learning outcomes. There are all kinds of parent-child programs that have fun activities, but this event is designed to maximize the interaction, both verbal and tactile, between father and child. By focusing on the child outcomes, not only can you reach the goals of your program, but you can also begin to form a partnership with the fathers and families.

In order to produce outcomes, the information that is provided to fathers is simple and direct. A tip sheet for fathers on developmentally appropriate reading skills provided by the National Institute for Literacy Institute (2006) is used to give fathers basic tips and hints to help them in their future reading activities. By giving fathers a job to do within their strengths and focusing them on the positive outcomes for their children, you encourage them to join the team. Even if a father does not read well (or cannot read at all), this activity can demonstrate to him that there is power in words shared through stories, specifically stories shared by a father. Although the event encourages reading to the children, fathers are also told that they can have a big impact on their children's literacy just through story-telling and direct verbal and physical interaction with their children.

Many men are embarrassed or intimidated by their lack of competency in reading and/or reading out loud. However, when given options (that are still based on their strengths and in spite of their weaknesses) to benefit their children, they are more likely to rise to the occasion.

The strength of differences

If most educators were to see a Dad and Kid Reading Night in person, they might assume that it is fun – and at times even silly – but that it does not have any impact on student outcomes. However, by speaking to the strengths of the fathers, providing the fathers an opportunity to experience these strengths in a safe environment, and allowing the fathers to see their children's reaction to the activities, this event serves as a solid teaching tool.



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