

# Support Groups for Fathers of Children with Developmental Disabilities



*Support for fathers, rather than being problem-focused, should be designed to develop closer father–child relationships, with the aim of promoting child development through the contribution that fathers can make as parents.*

## Why This Matters

1 in 6 children are born with a developmental disability. Most support services focus on either the child with the disability, or the child's mother, even though the father's role in childrearing is constantly increasing.

## Key Points

Fathers are increasingly taking on more responsibility pertaining to child-care within the home.

Fathers of children with developmental disabilities experience higher levels of stress and depression than fathers raising typical children.

Fathers' stress rises steeply within the first 3 years and then at a slower, constant rate for the next several years.

There is extensive research focusing on what makes an effective support group for mothers, and 'parents' of children with developmental disabilities, but very little for fathers, specifically.

## What the Research Says

- ❑ Fathers' most commonly reported motivators for joining a support group are that they want 'the best', to 'make the right choices', and to 'be there' for their children.
- ❑ Misconceptions about masculinity being linked to a limited knowledge of child-care can be a barrier to fathers' relationships with their children.
- ❑ Men feel more comfortable in support groups without their partner in attendance, so that they can address perceived deficiencies in instinct and knowledge openly.
- ❑ Parental participation in support groups can improve developmental, behavioural, and familial outcomes for those dealing with developmental disorders in the family.

*The potential tensions between masculine and fathering identities also appear relevant to understanding the obstacles men face when considering whether to access support services.*

## What the Research Says

Effective support groups for Fathers:

- ❑ View the father as both an individual and a co-constructive knowledge builder
- ❑ Inform participants about available funds and services relevant to their specific situations
- ❑ Include information regarding child-care
- ❑ Ensure that group leadership is strong, experienced, and well connected to the community
- ❑ Provide opportunities for participants to interact outside of the support group setting

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## What You Need to Know

- ❑ There is no 'one size fits all' model when it comes to designing and facilitating a support group. Support must be tailored to the needs, wants, and requirements of the father.
- ❑ Too much diversity in the unique situations participants are facing, are barriers to a support group's effectiveness.
- ❑ Scheduling a consistent time and space for meetings, which accommodates participants' schedules, yields higher participation rates.
- ❑ Fathers of children with developmental disabilities tend to experience unique stressors, above and beyond those of fathers of typically developing children.
- ❑ Fathers are motivated by the idea that fathering is a skill which can be learned and strengthened through support group participation.

*Membership within an effective support group provides significant social support which in turn improves group members' emotional well-being and ability to deal with the day-to-day challenges of caring for a child with disability.*