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Creating a Father-Friendly Library: An Examination of the Importance of Fatherhood Support in Today's Library Service Model



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ABSTRACT

Research shows the importance of fathers being present in the lives of children. The absence of support for fathers, perpetuates a long standing generational decline in the viability of men as a whole. This work seeks to introduce librarians to the possibilities of libraries offering support for dads. With library use among males being very low, this is also an opportunity for libraries to serve those who are often forgotten. This paper illustrates how the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) offers a path to help dads and explains how the NFI and libraries can partner through the creation of programs.

Introduction

With the advancement of technologies over the past quarter century, libraries have been exceedingly creative in developing ways to stay relevant in every service sector. Whether in public, academic, or special libraries, librarians have embraced new programs and ways to attract patrons whenever possible. However, for most libraries, one potential demographic area of growth still exists in male fathers.

I first became a father in my 20s, long before becoming a librarian. I worked diligently to raise my daughter (now 24) to become a strong, successful woman. In my youth, appreciation for the opportunity to be her father was not always evident as I worked to achieve my education as a non-traditional student, and to simply pay the bills and provide her with a quality home. Years later, at the age of 41, I again had the opportunity to become a father with the birth of my son. This experience was beyond description, because I had just won my first battle with cancer, and knew every day going forward was an opportunity to be the best dad I could be. In July 2015, my wife and I learned that my cancer had returned to a lymph node

in my abdomen. This was shocking for many reasons, but the experience of going through chemotherapy with a young son turned out to give me a more sincere understanding of what it means to be a dad.

As a librarian in an academic setting, I realize it is not always a top priority to provide very specific service to one demographic over another. However, it is very apparent that libraries are always seeking ways to draw in new users, and often non-traditional opportunities reap the biggest benefit. Whether in an academic, public, or even a special library such as in a prison, support for fathers is an area that holds potential opportunity.

An April 2016 report from the Pew Research Center on the Study of Internet, Science and Technology showed that 44% of Americans had visited a library (or bookmobile) in the past 12 months. Of those within the 44%, 50% regardless of gender were parents. By identified parental gender, 51% were women and only 38% of library-using parents were men. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that identified fathers made up less than 25% of total library users, and less than 15% of the total general population surveyed (Rainie, 2016). No matter the dissection of these numbers, male public library use is remarkably low, with 56% of the general population, regardless of gender, reporting to have not visited a library at all in the past 12 months.

At the same time, in a broader social context, a great deal of research indicates that the role of fathers in raising children is vitally important. According to the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), 24 million children (1 in 3) in America live without a father in the home. This fatherless population correlates strongly across a diverse body of research to many of the social ills we face as Americans (National Fatherhood Initiative [NFI], 2016b).

According to the NFI (2016b), the lack of a father's presence at home increases the chances that his children will live in poverty, experience teen pregnancy, and drop out of high school. These numbers are just the beginning when it comes to linking various social ills and the need of father involvement in raising children. This clear need for good fathers, coupled with many libraries already stepping in to fill community and human service programs, illustrates another potential for librarians to do a greater civic good.

From 2006 to 2010, first marriages ending in divorce or separation were around 36%, according to the National Health Statistics Report from March 2012 (Kimberly & Jonathan, 2012). The cultural decline of the importance of a biblically sound marriage has played out in concert with what many divorced fathers would

characterize as an attack on the role and importance of fathers within divorce courts all throughout the United States. Many times, fathers are shut out of their children's lives by well-meaning courts or gatekeeping mothers, which often leaves these men alone on an emotional island without support or someone to simply listen. Though research is showing more and more the traditional need that children have to be close to their fathers, the divorce and custody process seems to be slow to identify such need. Libraries have an opportunity to be an educational and support resource for fathers if and when they face such emotionally challenging times.

Fathers in the Library Workplace

In the library profession, as of 2010, 17% of library workers were male (American Library Association, 2010). Therefore, in a workforce that is 83% female, support of father engagement may be less than apparent, or even desirable for many to attempt. Since we all have either had, or did not have, a father present in our lives, we can add a voice to this conversation that desperately needs attention in our society.

Serving fathers either in workplace support or in classroom training settings is not solely reserved for men. In fact, the NFI offers many resources for women and mothers to help facilitate the growth of men in their roles as involved fathers. NFI also offers many resources for improving father support from a management perspective in the workplace (NFI, 2016d). NFI's training materials can assure libraries and librarians that with proper education they will not misstep in this area of programming, solely based on one's gender or personal experience.

From a broad strategic perspective, there are two areas where the National Fatherhood Initiative and libraries can partner to support fathers and fatherhood. First, libraries should take an introspective look at their organization to see how well they support fatherhood initiatives internally, and how their library workplace can improve to help fathers in their roles as dad. The NFI offers a workplace survey tool called the Father Friendly Check-Up™ which provides a holistic examination of how an organization currently supports fathers in the workplace. The second NFI tool for improving father support involves understanding how librarians can become change agents locally through education by becoming Certified Fatherhood Facilitators. This simple certification course teaches the best practices for teaching a facilitation course for fathers. It covers ways to connect with class participants and to understand their learning styles effectively.

Through these two mechanisms, librarians can improve their workplaces and impact cultural change while engaging a whole new demographic sector for libraries. The programs offered by the NFI extend well beyond the scope of this paper, and overall the topic of fatherhood support offers a wealth of partnering opportunities for any

library. By engaging in such a socially relevant issue, libraries and librarians have an opportunity to be change agents across a broad spectrum for their community stakeholders.

Library Service Specifically to Fathers

Over the years, librarianship has been a leading profession in the area of diversity and recruitment of non-traditional individuals to shape and change the profession. This has been a very positive effort and continues today through civic-based programs from the American Library Association and other library organizations. This type of outreach sets a strong foundation for librarian involvement in an area such as support for fathers in the community.

However, in a recent non-scientific search of Northern Kentucky University's EBSCO Discovery Service, which contains abstract information from over 200 databases, it showed that library literature database sources contain very little that pertain to support of fathers either in the workplace or as patrons. In fact, after applying limiters to select only peer-reviewed work and removing book reviews, only 18 articles remained from two major library databases. Upon reviewing these 18 citations, only two articles were even loosely related to fatherhood. Conversely, when using the terms "motherhood" and "libraries" and applying the same limiters, 83 articles were returned. Of those 83, at least 10 to 15 were directly related to either mothers in the workplace or the impact of motherhood on professional librarians.

There is little doubt that history has called us to pay particular attention to women's issues. Yet, as we live in an era of social change where equality is paramount, it is now time for librarians and libraries to lead the charge to support fathers and their involvement in raising positive and productive children. There is no need for gender exclusion or bias in this effort, as women and men all stand to gain by raising healthy, well-adjusted children. Women just as equally as men understand the need for good fathers and the role they can play inside and outside the home.

In moving in this new direction, libraries as organizations also stand to gain. With potentially less than 25% of reported library users in the past 12 months being fathers (and a far lower number when looking at the general population), even a modest gain in this user demographic would be meaningful (Rainie, 2016). By offering father facilitation courses, whether taught by librarians or other facilitators, libraries have an opportunity to seed the idea of other library services into the minds of men in attendance. Whether the attendees are mandated to attend a father facilitation course or are doing it by choice, the general idea fits squarely into the lifelong learning mission of all libraries.

Fatherhood facilitation courses have the potential to be a gateway to other male-oriented activities in the library, such as the hosting of scouting groups or groups from male-dominated hobbies such as amateur radio. Maker and Raspberry Pi computing classes can also be offered in the right library setting as well. Though these technology ideas are not male-exclusive events, and much attention is given to promoting female participation in these areas, increasing fathers' attendance in the library can only lead to good for their relationships with their children and give positive impressions of the library.

Within the academic community, there are also opportunities to help fathers who are new to college or are returning even on a part-time basis. By offering a facilitation group meeting for student fathers on a periodic basis, a library can provide a new form of specific outreach to a group of users that might never know about or use library services. Giving these dads a cohort that understands the thoughts and feelings that might accompany the challenges of balancing being a good dad and successful student can be an intangible for their ultimate success.

Though prison libraries make up a very small fraction of the overall library population, incarcerated fathers may represent individuals with the greatest need for support. NFI has developed a wealth of training materials geared toward this demographic of fathers and these libraries might best serve as the vehicle of delivery (NFI, 2016d). Because of the serious nature of the venue, librarians in this setting might have the best potential to implement broad social change over any other area of librarianship.

What is the National Fatherhood Initiative?

The mission of the National Fatherhood Initiative states that "National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) transforms organizations and communities by equipping them to intentionally and proactively engage fathers in their children's lives" (NFI, 2016c). To accomplish this, the organization's work can be broadly categorized into two areas. First, they provide tools to empower workplace involvement and improvement around being "father friendly." Beyond the organizational context, they then provide training to individuals and groups on ways to creatively help fathers in whatever capacity they reside.

The Father Friendly Organizational Checkup focuses on four areas of assessment and is freely available to all via the NFI web site (NFI, 2016a). The four areas of assessment within this tool include leadership development, organizational development, program development, and community engagement. The assessment's focus on leadership development seeks to measure where an organization's culture is regarding awareness of fathering issues. The organizational development area focuses on questions relating to an organization's policies, procedures, and physical

environment as related to supporting dads. The program development component looks to measure an organization's current father-related programs and services, if any exist. Lastly, the community engagement section seeks to measure the current capacity an organization has to offer community programs for fathers.

Overall, this assessment tool can be very telling if a library has never tried to identify the needs of fathers, either as employees or within the served community. Through reviewing the assessment, it was very obvious that even the most aware service organizations could easily fall short of meeting the needs of fathers. One simple question that serves as an example from the tool is a question regarding the availability of diaper changing stations within male restrooms. In the past thirty years, there is little doubt that most female restrooms would contain such devices; however, there is not always the evident need for some men to have this type of access within male facilities.

The library of free material available at the NFI's site includes topics ranging from "Mentoring Guides for Fathers and Fatherless Children," to the "46 Best Father Related Films," to "Fatherhood Work in Pregnancy Centers," and many topics in between. By reviewing this collection it becomes quickly apparent that the topic of fatherhood support is as extensive as the millions of fathers that can be served. An entry point to providing a father-focused service comes in the form of the Certified Father Facilitator Course offered by the NFI (NFI, 2016e).

As one who has completed the Certified Father Facilitator course, I can attest to the value of its content, and can also testify that the topic itself is very challenging. This course provides a great framework of thought on how to engage fathers in a classroom setting, and how to make their classroom time more meaningful. It offers training on how to take personal life experiences as a father, or a mother, and translate that into being a mentor through tough topics that fathers may face today. One thing this course does not provide is specific subject matter for a facilitation course. Since being a parent is so multifaceted, this course only aims to deliver the basics on being a good facilitator and does not teach how to be a "father expert." That knowledge is accessible from the NFI library through their many training materials, but since each audience can be unique, a facilitator needs to consult these and other resources thoughtfully much like any educator teaching such a complex subject.

Conclusion

In this rapidly evolving technical era that all libraries and librarians live in today, one constant that remains is our service to humankind. Being human starts in the same form for all of us; we all begin as infants. As any parent can testify, that phase rapidly passes into busy childhood and teenage years, with maturity on many levels coming

quicker than ever before. Whether a mother or a father, being a parent today is a great challenge, especially for those who hold Christian ideals. Fatherhood itself in recent decades has taken on a completely different meaning, whether for good or bad. However, one thing appears clearer today more than ever: dads are vital to the success of raising kids.

Libraries and librarians have a great opportunity to help fathers in all situations if we take the time to explore the topic. The National Fatherhood Initiative and other organizations offer the platform and information to help build a meaningful father support program. In doing this, libraries also have a potential positive outcome to grow connections with male users of all ages, whether in the public, academic, or special library sphere. †

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