

# Principal

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## Is Your School

# FATHER-FRIENDLY?

Allan Shedlin, Jr.  
Children do better in school when their fathers are involved.

**IN BRIEF**  
The author explains why fathers feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in what they regard as a "female-favored" elementary school environment. He urges schools to recruit more male teachers and provides suggestions that principals can use to make their schools more "father-friendly."

A s part of my interview for the principalship of a New York City elementary school, the retiring principal took me on a tour. While we were waiting for an elevator, an exuberant first grader came up to me and boldly said, "Hi, my name's Samantha. Who are you and what are you doing here?" I told her my name, shook her hand, and explained that I was thinking about working in her school. Her smile was quickly replaced by a look of alarm.



PATRICK MOLNAR/TAXI

"Oh no," she said. "Is Mr. Ball leaving?" "I don't know," I responded. "Who is Mr. Ball?" "He's the PE teacher," she answered. Puzzled, she continued. "Then is Mr. Hammer leaving?" "I don't know," I answered. "Who is Mr. Hammer?" "He's the woodworking teacher," she answered. After explaining that both the gym and woodworking shop were located in the basement, she exclaimed, "Well, if they're not leaving, how could you work here? We don't allow men above the basement!"

As I toured the school, it struck me that I saw no men in 23 self-contained classrooms and a handful of special classes. That realization prompted me to think about the absence of male teachers during my own elementary school years and the absence of male students during my graduate work in elementary education. Further thoughts about the general absence of men in young children's lives led me to think about the large number of single-parent homes in our country and the fact that a very large majority of those homes are headed by women. There is substantial research documenting not only the negative consequences for children's lives in the absence of men, but for men's lives in the absence of children.

#### Fathers Are Parents, Too

There is also an abundance of research that supports the important benefits to families when men and children are present in each others' lives, benefits that are particularly evident in schools. Sixty-four percent of children do better in school when their fathers are involved in their schools, regardless of whether their fathers live with them. Research shows that both in two-parent and single-parent families, the involvement of fathers exerts a distinct influence on whether children repeat a grade, get into college, drop out of school, and participate in extracurricular activities—even after controlling for mothers' involvement in school.

The importance of parents' involve-

ment in the education of their children has long been recognized, but because the word "parent," as used in school, has until quite recently been virtually synonymous with "mother," it is well past time to do whatever we can to encourage the involvement of fathers as genuine partners in children's education.



Although there are a growing number of schools and school districts that are making progress in encouraging father involvement, most school policies and attitudes toward fathers were designed for a society in which fathers were narrowly thought of as breadwinners and disciplinarians, and not for a society that is no longer averse to using the word "parenting" to describe desirable parental qualities. We may not yet be able to say that something is "as American as motherhood, fatherhood, and apple pie," but we are getting closer.

There is plenty that can be done to make schools more father-friendly. Although this article focuses on what individual schools can do, it is critical to recognize the importance of children and men in each others' lives on the

local, state, and school community levels. And it is necessary to acknowledge that involving men in the lives of kids (and vice versa) is a major national challenge that is not restricted to schools.

#### Why Fathers Stay Away

Why do fathers, and men in general, tend to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in schools? The reasons are manifold and complex. Elementary schools have always been considered primarily places for women. Although it is difficult to get accurate demographic data, it is generally estimated that 52 percent of elementary school teachers and approximately 60 percent of elementary school principals are women. Furthermore, a variety of studies over the years have pointed out that the elementary school curriculum, with its emphasis on verbal skills, boys' girls' struggles. It has also been argued that behavioral expectations at the elementary level also favor girls.

Added to that fact that parent involvement in the earliest grades has traditionally been the province of women and men begin to understand why many fathers, influenced by their personal histories as young male students in a "female-favored" environment, approach school involvement warily.

What can be done to change this perception? We can begin at the national level with a concerted effort to recruit male elementary school teachers. At the community level, we can encourage local government and corporate leaders to examine the family-friendliness of their policies, with a special emphasis on encouraging fathers to participate in their children's schools. Schools can take a leadership position by encouraging boys as well as girls to become Red Cross-certified babysitters or camp counselors, zoo docents, and other child-oriented activities. All of these actions help challenge the widespread belief that working with children is "women's work."

#### Helping Dads Become Involved

When taken at the individual school level, however, often the most direct and immediate route to helping fathers become more involved in their children's education, although the complexity of the task should not be underestimated.

Here are some things that principals can do:

- Articulate and demonstrate that home and school are partners in the education of children by creating specific ways to work together on behalf of students. One way we did this in my school was to reschedule the parent-teacher conference so that both parents and teacher were expected to contribute 15 minutes of information during the half-hour conference.
- Make a concerted effort to involve dads during the earliest school years so that from the beginning they feel welcome and accustomed to being involved. I found that conveying an expectation that every father spend a full school day each year with his child worked very well.
- Arrange school meetings at times that dads are likely to be able to attend, even considering Saturdays as an option.

When I was invited to write this article about fathers as a "hard-to-reef" school population, I was jarred by the thought that half of a school's parent body is considered, by definition, to be "hard-to-reef." I hope this article helps principals, as school leaders, seize the opportunity to make their schools father-friendly places that enable men to feel welcome throughout the school—not just in the basement. □

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#### WEB RESOURCES

DADS Unlimited offers a variety of information and services, including links to other resources. [www.daddy.com/](http://www.daddy.com/)

NAESP's *Communicator* published "Dads Make a Difference" in December 1997. [www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentType=121](http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentType=121)

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics cites fathers' role in comprehensive report, *Fathers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools*. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsub98/fathers/>

The National Fatherhood Initiative publishes *Fatherhood Today*, a quarterly newsletter advocating fatherhood renewal. [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)