

The Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum

Responsible Fatherhood as a Learning Method

All activities in the curriculum are intended to assist the facilitator in helping the men think differently about their roles as fathers and about altering their behavior. The *Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum* is based on discussion. It assumes that most people want to act responsibly but often don't know how to or face obstacles, many of which are created by their own behavior. Neither the curriculum nor the facilitator attempts to tell participants how to run their lives (although the curriculum does provide much relevant information about the typical problems of unemployed noncustodial parents). Instead, the method relies on participants' own experiences and opinions — expressed through discussion — to show group members that there are alternatives to their unsuccessful past behavior.

Each session of the *Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum* has three parts:

- A beginning exercise that is usually called “What's New?”
- One or several activities that require the active involvement of everyone
- A closing activity called “Feedback/Wrap-up”

The activities almost always have two parts. The first part is an exercise that presents some new ideas in an interesting way. The second part helps group members think about these ideas by means of a discussion structured around a set of questions.

During the discussion, the facilitator must decide whether to move on before the group loses its focus or whether to let the discussion continue. It is always better to move on to another idea before the group loses interest. If the discussion is leading the group to consider important issues, or if the group is using a topic to get to know one another, then it is valuable to extend the time committed to the exercise. If the group is not responding to the exercise, it is better to move on and try another activity.

The Experiential Learning Cycle

Educational programming that gets people actively involved in their learning is referred to as *experiential*. The *Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum* activities have been design-

ed to recognize the knowledge and experience that the fathers bring to the group. Rather than telling the men how to live their lives, the curriculum sets up experiences that enable them to draw conclusions to examine their attitudes, to get excited about a new idea, to see a skill in action, to learn from other fathers, and to practice new ways of relating to their children.

This approach is based on a conceptual framework called the *experiential learning cycle*. The cycle traces the path of learning from an initial training experience all the way to the creation of a “mini-action” plan for making positive changes in the fathers’ lives. The discussion questions after each activity are designed to cover five important stages in the experiential learning cycle that pave the way to meaningful learning: (1) experiencing, (2) reporting, (3) processing, (4) generalizing, and (5) applying.

1. Experiencing. In this first stage of learning, group members participate in an activity that produces information about themselves, about communicating in relationships, about the role of fathers, about reactions to dilemmas, and so on. The initial activity might be done individually, in small groups, or in the larger group. Sometimes the first experience is structured as a game or contest. Examples of such experiences used in the curriculum include:

- Role playing
- Problem solving or sharing information in small groups
- Giving and receiving feedback in pairs
- Brainstorming
- Communicating nonverbally
- Analyzing dilemmas or case studies
- Completing a handout

- Competing in Fact or Myth games
- Debating an issue

The experiencing stage of the learning cycle enables the fathers to develop a common base of information and experience to use in the discussion that follows. *Avoid the temptation to end a session before fully discussing (or processing) an activity.* Sometimes the activity is so much fun that facilitators get caught up in the experience and forget what they are trying to accomplish. If the process stops at this stage — just after the experience — learning will be left to chance. The subsequent four steps of the learning cycle are more important than the initial experiencing stage.

2. Reporting. In the reporting stage of the learning cycle, the fathers share what they saw or how they felt during the activity in the experiencing stage. The question here is, “What happened, and how did it go?” Talking about what happened makes each individual’s experience available to all group members. In reporting on their experience with the opening activity, the fathers may be asked to discuss both their thoughts and their feelings. It is common for individuals to report that they experienced the activity in different ways or to say that their reactions varied quite a bit. The following methods can help to make individual’s reactions and observations known to the group:

- Record participants’ responses on newsprint (especially in brainstorming activities).
- Go around the room asking volunteers to share what they experienced in the activity and how they felt about it.
- If participants have worked in small groups, have each group report to the entire group.

3. Processing (Discussing Patterns and Dynamics). Processing is a critical stage in the learning cycle. Now that some baseline information has been reported and shared, participants systematically begin to *examine* what they experienced and how they felt about it. The question here is, “What kinds of things happened, and why?” Processing is the talking-through stage in which participants begin to recognize patterns in the ways people think, feel, and react. The discussion might lead a participant to see that interrupting and judging someone seriously interferes with effective communication. Perhaps this individual had always seen himself as a good communicator; now he realizes that he has some destructive habits. Often participants notice interesting similarities and differences among themselves. Occasionally, a comment causes someone to gain new insights or perspectives. Perhaps the discussion leads a father to see how his child’s mother may be reacting to something he’s doing or how his child might be affected by ongoing conflict in the parents’ relationship. Among the techniques that can facilitate processing are:

- Calling attention to recurring themes in the reports of individuals
- Focusing on the particular roles that individual fathers played during the activity
- Asking opened-ended questions, such as “What has fatherhood been like so far?”

In preparing to conduct a session, plan carefully how to handle the processing stage. Although the discussion points in the curriculum typically provide open-ended questions, you should preview the questions to be sure that they are appropriate for your style and for the sensibilities of your audience. Too little time processing an activity can leave

participants with “unfinished business” and unanswered questions. Some of the men may be left behind or distracted because they are still trying to understand something about the experience they went through in the opening activity.

4. Generalizing (Developing Real-World Principles). In this stage of the learning cycle, participants are asked to make connections between the opening activity and everyday life. The key question here is, “What have we learned?” Encourage participants to focus on situations in their personal or work lives that might relate to the activity. Their task is to develop some principles from the activity that they can apply in their own lives. Some strategies for generalizing from the processing stage are:

- Having each participant complete the sentence “The most important thing I learned today was. . . .”
- Asking participants to identify realistic situations in their lives which relate to what they learned from the activity

During this generalizing stage, it is useful to write what participants say they have learned on newsprint or on a blackboard. When hearing these responses, (1) take time to help individuals complete their thoughts so that others understand what they mean, (2) accept controversial responses, and (3) avoid evaluating individual statements. Feel free to add information of your own to augment participants’ learning.

5. Applying (Planning Effective Use of Learning). The final stage of the experiential learning cycle is what makes the approach practical. The applying stage takes the generalizing stage one step further. Whereas the focus of the generalizing stage

is to think of the key concepts of the session in terms of real-life situations, the focus of the applying stage is for the fathers to figure out how to apply these ideas in real life. The question here is, “How will you use what you have learned?” The following strategies can help participants to apply their learning to actual situations in which they are involved:

- Having participants in groups of two or three take turns helping one another apply generalizations to their personal problem situations
- Having group members make concrete promises to one another about actions they plan to take and changes they will make (individuals are more likely to carry out planned actions that they share with others)
- Practicing new behaviors by role playing real-life situations

The following example demonstrates the experiential learning cycle using “Values Voting” (Activity 2-4 in Session 2).

Case Example: Values Voting

During the *experiencing stage*, fathers think about and then express their reactions to different — often conflicting — beliefs about how to live their lives by “voting” on values. (That is, they walk to the sign “Agree,” “Disagree,” or “Unsure” that best describes their opinions about the value statement being discussed.) The participants discuss each value statement and why they agree or disagree with it or are unsure about it. Typically, part of this experience is the discovery of diverse values among the fathers.

During the *reporting stage*, participants discuss how easy or hard it was to vote on these

values. They may also discuss why some values are harder than others to vote on or to define (see discussion questions 1 and 2 in “Values Voting,” Activity 2-4). Because adults are rarely asked to express their fundamental values, the novelty of this experience is often reported by participants.

In the *processing stage*, the facilitator asks a question such as, “How much does your behavior in the outside world fit with what you’ve said here in the group?” The facilitator tries to make the experience of values voting meaningful in the outside world in order to get the men thinking about the patterns in their lives.

In the *generalizing stage*, participants may identify principles like these: (1) Values don’t always determine people’s behavior. (2) People feel better about themselves when they live according to their own — not someone else’s — values. (3) A person’s values may conflict in some situations where it is difficult to decide on a course of action. (4) As people learn, their values may change.

Finally, in the *applying stage*, the facilitator asks, “Which values reflect the things that you want to change about yourself, and how can you do this?” The facilitator asks the participants to think about their values and how they can impart those values to their children.

Not all activities will follow this precise order. It may be hard, for instance, to separate the reporting from the processing. However, in planning and implementing the sessions, keep the five-stage learning cycle in mind. With practice it gets easier to move the group through these stages and to focus on the bottom line: behavioral change.

Modifying the Curriculum

The *Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum* is designed to provide continuity from session to session and, over time, to build on concepts, information, and skills. The goals of each session are to introduce information that can enhance participants' lives and to continue the process of building group cohesion and mutual support. The descriptions of each session and activity give the facilitator guidance and background information, and — except for audiovisual materials and supplies needed to carry out activities (including handouts for each participant) — the curriculum is complete and self-contained.

Although peer group facilitators may use the curriculum as it stands without making significant changes, there are many ways to modify it to match the interests of participants and the varying features of programs. The following suggestions will help group leaders adapt the *Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum* to meet the needs of their group and program.

Choosing Among Activities. Many sessions include more than one activity with the same general objectives. To choose the activities that best suit the participants, ask the following questions:

- Are the men comfortable doing experiential activities? Given the choice, would they prefer to tackle a situation “hands on”? To what degree do the men resist working in small groups or role playing, or using other methods in the curriculum?
- To what extent can the men relate to the objectives of the session? For example, if they are exploring the needs of their

children, the amount of contact that they have with their children may influence which activities you choose.

- What is the mood of the group? Do the men seem to prefer activities that are more fun and more active? Do they need to experience more successes? Have they bonded together, or do they need to work further on group cohesion before taking on particular topics or activities?
- To what extent are participants able to take charge of their learning? Do they involve themselves in the tasks of the session, or do they need a lot of guidance and prodding?

Modifying Case Studies and Problem

Situations. Many curriculum activities use case studies and problem situations to structure the practice of decision making, assertiveness, and small-group skills. Leaders may modify these (or create new ones) to include specific situations that participants face. For example, because the ages of the fathers and their children may vary greatly, it is important to create situations that reflect this diversity. Similarly, case studies and problem situations should reflect the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of all participants.

Rearranging the Order of the Sessions.

To be effective, the *Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum* must meet the varying needs of the noncustodial fathers. The men must feel a strong sense of ownership of the group. One way to impart this is to give participants some control over the topics discussed as well as the sequencing of topics. If you do decide to rearrange topics, try to keep sessions about similar topics together. For instance, one series of topics relates to children, and another is about relationships; such

sequences should stay together. Before changing the order of the sessions, review the “What’s New?” and “Feedback/Wrap-up” activities, because they connect the sessions in the current order of the curriculum.

Adding Sessions. As participants become comfortable with peer support, they may suggest topics that they would like to cover. Capitalize on this interest by designing your own sessions, following the general format provided in the Responsible Fatherhood curriculum.

Adjusting to Reading and Writing Difficulties. Some participants in a group may have difficulty reading and/or writing. Because many activities use reading or writing as a tool, adjust your methods to compensate for such difficulties. If reading presents a problem, the facilitator or a group member may read the activity aloud. If writing is a problem, alter the exercise so that writing is not required, or complete it in a small group where at least one member has writing skills.

Using Presenters and Leaders from Outside the Group

The curriculum suggests two ways to incorporate outsiders: as *presenters* of a specific topic (who discuss and share their own experiences) or as *substitute leaders* for one or more sessions about a specific topic (such as race and ethnic issues or how to manage conflict and handle anger).

The key to using outside presenters or leaders effectively is choosing people who are comfortable with themselves and who are knowledgeable and articulate about the session’s topic. In addition, substitute leaders should be highly skilled in group-process techniques. Outside presenters who are brought in to share their own experiences should generally be positive role models for the participants and should be enough like them in terms of race, ethnicity, and other characteristics to be convincing.

Starting the Peer Group

Setting the Stage

Before peer group sessions begin, the facilitator needs to *set the stage* to ensure a positive experience for everyone. This includes selecting and meeting with group members, selecting a room, and preparing materials for the sessions.

Selecting the Group. Peer support will be most successful if:

- The group is made up of 8 to 15 participants; and
- Participants speak the same language. (If most group members speak Spanish, for example, the leader should also speak Spanish.)

Peer support can be effective only if the group is small enough to become cohesive. If a group has more than 20 participants, the leader usually spends more time on “crowd control” than on teaching and facilitating discussion. On the other hand, a group with fewer than five members may not generate the energy to propel the group process; if participants drop out over time, the group can become too small to be effective.

Selecting a Room. The peer group’s environment should foster interaction. The meeting room should be:

- Large enough for the number of participants, but not too large; avoid multi-purpose rooms and auditoriums.
- Private; outsiders should not be free to walk in and out of the meeting space.

- Quiet; traffic noises or loud voices from the next room can be very distracting.
- Clean and well lit.

Seating should be arranged in a circle to facilitate discussion. Making the room attractive by hanging posters and artwork will improve the group’s dynamics. Coffee and soft drinks will help group members relax.

Preparing Material for the Sessions. Part of preparing for peer group sessions is for the facilitator to be adequately trained. Read the curriculum thoroughly, and organize all handouts, markers, and other materials in advance. It’s helpful to arrive at the meeting room early, preferably 30 minutes before a session begins. *Preparation makes the facilitator’s job a lot easier and much more effective.*

Before each session, set priorities, and decide on your objectives. Plan which activities (and which steps within each activity) are most important in achieving the session’s objectives. In general, give the highest priority to activities and steps that build skills (those that practice applying concepts to real-life situations).

Working with Involuntary Participants

Members of a peer support group in PFS often were ordered to attend sessions by a judge, by an administrative officer of the court, or by a child support enforcement offi-

cial. Attendance was mandatory in many sites, and there could be legal consequences for failure to comply. Mandatory attendance also raised special issues for the PFS program, the peer support group, and the facilitator.

Understandably, noncustodial fathers who have been ordered to attend meetings of a support group will at first be mistrustful and cautious about participating. To overcome this barrier, the facilitator needs to listen carefully and must try to understand each participant's experiences and point of view. It is not unusual for a participant to question the facilitator's interest and to see the facilitator as an enforcer of the courts.

Besides showing interest and concern, the facilitator can establish an effective group with involuntary participants by communicating clearly about participation requirements and consequences at the start of the program. Be clear from the outset about what constitutes satisfactory participation, and enforce those expectations consistently throughout the program. Participants will often test the rules and how strictly the facilitator enforces them. For example, members who are late or who miss a session might be required to make up the time or to repeat the session later; those who fall asleep during a session might be asked to lead an activity or to repeat the session they slept through; those who verbally abuse staff or other group members might be required to apologize in public, with the warning that further incidents will not be tolerated. After ground rules are established, enforce them consistently. However, if the consequences for breaking rules are perceived to be unfair, the facilitator may lose the group's trust. It is a difficult balance. Facilitators should think through such issues in advance and should be prepared to respond appropriately when an incident occurs.

Beginning with Each Group Member

Setting the stage for a peer support group requires the facilitator to think about how to use the curriculum, how to set up the room, how many participants will show up, and whether the participants will accept the facilitator. Yet the most important part of beginning is the relationship that is being formed between the facilitator and each member of the group — especially where many members have been ordered to attend and are not present because they volunteered and are interested.

The group leader should begin by having a one-on-one meeting with each man before he joins the group. This will give an opportunity to gauge how willing that father is to participate in the peer support group, and also to learn something about his style and attitude outside the group setting. Often the man will have a long story about how he was wronged. He may blame the mother of his child or the welfare department for forcing him to come. Whatever his belief, resentment is common. He has convinced himself of the truth of his story, and at this point it is not constructive to disagree. Listening, however, pays off. If the facilitator takes the time to hear what this father has to say and encourages him to speak honestly, the man is more likely to believe that the facilitator has something meaningful to offer, which makes it easier to help him shape solutions later, during the course of the sessions.

In these one-on-one meetings, the facilitator will discover men who are hostile and who want nothing to do with the group. But by pointing out that he or she is not responsible for the order to attend ("That is between the

judge and you”), the facilitator can remain neutral and can steer the conversation toward the man’s objections and concerns. This frees the facilitator to explore how the participant’s time can be used most productively. To shift the conversation away from resentment and anger, ask the man what he can gain from the group other than “getting the court off your back” (or whoever he blames for causing him to participate). Then help him focus on using the group to get what he wants out of life. The key questions are, “What responsibility do you as a father have for supporting your children?” and “Do you really want to support them?” The only participants who do not stand to benefit are those who want no part of being a father. The facilitator is in a good position to work out a satisfactory agreement with any man who has the goal of being a responsible father.

Often a father who is having a difficult time accepting the requirement that he participate in a program or peer support group can understand the purpose of participating when it is explained by another group member. This can be done individually or in a group. Another participant, who did not accept the program initially but has come to value it, can help a resistant father see what can be gained from participating. Some men will remain hostile, nonetheless, and yet it is possible for them to remain angry and hostile — especially about how they may have been treated by “the system,” the mother of their children, or others — and still benefit from participating in peer group support if they are sincere about fulfilling their role as father.

Occasionally a man will be referred who does not want anything to do with his children and who is openly hostile. He should not be put into a group, because he does not support

its purpose of helping each man to fulfill his role as a father. The program needs alternatives, such as individual counseling sessions to address why a father is unwilling to accept his responsibility. It is important that the program not let such a father off with no requirements, because that would be unfair to the men who are already in the group. Being hostile should lead to less pleasant consequences than being cooperative does.¹

Establishing Ground Rules

A peer support group needs rules in order to function effectively and benefit its members. Individuals who do not accept these rules cannot be allowed to stay in the group. At the very least, the following ground rules should be established:

- No physical violence or threats of violence.
- No weapons.
- No stealing.
- No use or sale of drugs or alcohol on the premises.
- No coming to meetings intoxicated or stoned.
- No hitting or abusive language toward children.

Other rules are needed to help the group achieve its goals. Issues such as sleeping during sessions, refusing to talk, refusing to stop talking, insulting group members or the group leader, smoking, cursing, and interrupting can be handled best by having the group

1. The chapter “Enhancing Motivation” in D. H. Hepworth and J. A. Larson, *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1986), addresses approaches to gaining the cooperation of mandated program clients.

discuss these problems and agree on specific rules with clear-cut consequences for breaking them. This approach has the following advantages:

- Everyone will understand the rules, and no one can claim that the rules are unfair.
- Having accepted the rules, each member shares responsibility with the group leader for enforcing them.
- The goals of peer support include encouraging responsible behavior; it is therefore a valuable learning experience for each member to take part of the responsibility for the group's functioning.
- Because a peer support group includes many different people and ideas, a consensus approach to formulating rules will foster mutual respect and begin the process of building trust.

Reaching Agreements

Besides the established rules, agreements are needed among group members regarding the responsibilities and limits of membership. Some examples of appropriate agreements include:

What Is Said in the Group Stays in the Group. Personal experiences that a man

shares with the group will not become gossip with others outside the group. (See the next section about confidentiality.)

The Group Is Nonjudgmental. Although it is OK to disagree with another member's point of view, it is not OK to put down that person.

"I" Statements Are Preferred. A statement that begins "I believe" or "I feel" is stronger and communicates more effectively than one that begins "You should" or "People say." The group should encourage "I" statements because they bring issues into the present and because they foster mutual respect and a sense of responsibility. Both the facilitator and group members will benefit by using "I" statements.

Members Have the Right to "Pass." Although everyone is encouraged to participate in each session, it is OK for a member to "pass" if he really doesn't want to share his ideas about a particular topic.

There Are No Dumb Questions. *All* questions will be addressed, so it is OK to ask any question, no matter how silly it seems. It is also OK for the facilitator to say that he or she does not know the answer but will try to find out.

Confidentiality

In counseling and self-help groups, it is usually assumed that what is said in the group is privileged information and is not communicated beyond the group. In peer support groups, confidentiality is the basis of the relationship between staff members and participants; it creates trust and respect among them. Particularly in peer support groups, participants need to be able to speak freely about personal situations so that they can come to terms with their unproductive behavior and begin to change.

Candor about confidentiality gives clients the message that staff members will treat them honestly and directly. A frank discussion about the scope and limits of confidentiality can prevent misunderstandings and put the client at ease, since he will know what to expect. Such a discussion should occur both when the participant enters the program and when the facilitator addresses the first group gathering.

Program staff should make it clear that, although confidentiality is the first and foremost principle governing their interactions with participants, there are limits to confidentiality. In certain circumstances, the nature of what a participant communicates may obligate a staff member to inform an outside party of what the man has said. Usually, such a situation arises when a participant's statements indicate that some harm has occurred or could occur to a third person, as in threats of violence against his children or the children's mother.

This discussion covers only broad principles of confidentiality and is not a guide for

specific conduct in specific situations. What can and cannot be held confidential varies from state to state, so you should contact knowledgeable parties in your agency to get specific information.

To formulate agency policy regarding confidentiality, program managers and staff — including peer group facilitators — should:

- Find out what your legal responsibilities are; educate yourself.
- Review your agency's policies to see whether they comply with the law.
- Develop written policies and guidelines, and establish clinical consultation or supervision to monitor them.
- Tell clients what the policies are, and keep them informed about actions that affect your work with them.

Mandatory Reporting Laws

Child Abuse. In almost all states, anyone who knows of child abuse or neglect or has any reason to suspect it should report the abuse immediately to the appropriate agency. Many states have an 800 telephone number (a state hotline) for just that purpose.

What constitutes knowledge or suspicion of child abuse or neglect? A clear-cut example is any observed abusive behavior by an adult. Less clear are situations where a child's injuries seem suspicious or where a group member has made abusive threats.

Peer group facilitators and other staff may have to make difficult judgments about abuse. Agencies need written policies about

how staff should handle indications of child abuse and should train staff as necessary. Almost all states designate certain persons as “reporters” who must disclose child abuse or be subject to legal sanctions. Learn whether your state includes your job title under its mandated reporting procedures; if so, comply fully, because penalties for failing to report child abuse are serious.

Threats Against Third Parties and Suicide Threats. Some state courts have held that mental health professionals who have knowledge that a client is contemplating suicide or doing physical harm to another person has a “duty to warn.” Precisely which categories of professionals have this duty also vary from state to state. To learn whether you could be held accountable under this principle, consult your local mental health association. Because this is a new and evolving area of law, however, it may not always be clear who has the duty to warn, or what kind of warning is required, or to whom the warning should be given. The question of who should be notified will depend on the circumstances; sometimes it is the police (particularly in case of threats against a third party), but the obligation to report may also include the person who is the target of the threat. In the case of a suicide threat, family members may need to be notified.

Because no single agency is responsible for mandatory reporting laws, it may be difficult to get advice about the “duty to warn.” If your agency is private or not-for-profit, talk to its lawyer and insurance agent; if you work for a public agency, consult its appropriate legal department. Suicide prevention services and hotlines might also provide helpful information and assistance with threats of suicide. And, again, you may want to check with your local mental health association.

While you review local reporting requirements, consider using a procedure whereby any staff member who hears a threat that is in any way credible should discuss it with his or her supervisor. Obviously, judgment is needed in deciding when to report. “If I don’t get that _____, I’ll kill myself” or “I was so mad at that _____, I wanted to kill him” are widely used figures of speech, and you will have to decide whether they are serious threats. It is often recommended that a counselor ascertain how specific the person’s plans are to carry out the threat. If the person has a specific plan and the means to carry it out (such as access to a weapon), then the threat should be considered serious. Consultation with a clinical professional is essential.

It is obvious but worth mentioning that if you “warn” someone and are wrong about the person issuing threats (that is, there is no real danger), that person will feel that his confidentiality has been violated. Reporting must be handled with care. If staff decide there is any likelihood of the threat’s being carried out, they might be required to report their concerns to a senior manager. Taking appropriate action (such as calling the police or a family member) might be done only under the supervision of a senior manager except in extreme emergencies.

AIDS/HIV. Suppose that a client reveals his AIDS/HIV status (or that he has another sexually transmitted disease) to you and indicates that his partner is not aware of it. What you can do in this situation is not always clear. Laws related to AIDS/HIV confidentiality vary widely from state to state, as do those on STDs. Some states emphasize the right to privacy of the person who is infected; other states focus on the rights of the uninfected party. Because this

is such a new area of law, it is vital that you check with knowledgeable professionals before formulating a policy.

For further information, contact your state health department, state bar association, state human rights commission, and/or the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Other Issues of Confidentiality, Regulations, and Law

Even when issues of confidentiality are not immediately life-threatening, they still may affect the relationships between program staff and participants. Staff need to be trained to handle issues like the following, and agencies need to develop policies about them.

Illegal Activities. What should staff members do if they discover that a client is using or selling drugs or is involved in some other illegal activity? What issues should be considered when deciding whether or not to report?

Violations of Child Support or Welfare Regulations. What is a staff member's responsibility if he or she finds out that a father in the program has a substantial unreported source of income, or has a child for whom he has not established paternity, or has another child support order — perhaps in another state — that he is not paying? Similarly, what should staff do if they discover that a custodial mother is working “off the books” and collecting AFDC; or that a father is living in a “married-like state” with a woman currently collecting AFDC?

Sharing Information. Which information should be communicated by staff — and particularly by peer group facilitators — to other staff within the agency or to supervisors and

then placed in written records? What is the appropriate level of communication with the staff of other agencies cooperating with your program? Should information about a client's AIDS/HIV status, criminal activities, or relationship with the custodial parent be passed from one agency to another in order to provide integrated service to the client? How should the client's right to privacy be protected?

The handling of clients' information is usually governed by numerous state laws and regulations. In certain cases, federal regulations supersede state regulations. If you work for a government agency, the agency that provides legal counsel should be able to advise you about information-sharing regulations and reporting requirements. If you work for a nongovernment agency, you should ask the government agency with which you are contracted about confidentiality requirements that apply to your program. Seeking the advice of a private lawyer may also be necessary.

Ensuring Privacy

Staff need to be careful when sharing information with one another about clients. Although some sharing is necessary to provide effective services, program participants will object if intimate details of their lives are shared with other staff without apparent reason. A professional relationship in which staff's conversations about clients are focused on helping the clients is an important way to manage this tension. Of course, it is *never* appropriate for staff to gossip about clients or to discuss them over lunch or in any public place; nor should clients be discussed off the job with a friend or neighbor or even with members of the client's family. Program man-

agers have an important role to play in modeling professional information-sharing behavior.

Program managers may need to develop a release form that describes which information will be communicated to the referral source (for example, the court, the child support enforcement agency, etc.) and to other agencies providing services (for example, mediation, on-the-job training, etc.). Such a form is usually signed by the client at intake and specifies who, outside the agency, will be given information and for what reasons. In some jurisdictions, release forms are mandated by state law and regulation. In other situations, it is good practice to make clear to the client precisely what will be communicated.

Depending on the situation and the jurisdiction, clients' records might be subpoenaed by the public attorney, by an attorney for a custodial parent, or directly by the judge in a child support enforcement proceeding or a child custody dispute. Given this possibility, it is important to consider what information is recorded in attendance records, counselors' notes, and progress assessments by staff, as well as what information is generally placed in clients' files.

Additionally, clients' records should be kept in a locked filing cabinet and should be read only by staff with a direct need to know. No files should be left unattended on staff members' desks.

Clinical Supervision

Although a client's threats of violence to a third party or to himself are obviously extreme problems, staff are more likely to encounter issues of substance abuse, depression, and other emotional and psychological problems that are beyond their competence to handle. This highlights the program's need for clinical supervision or clinical consultation, which can be provided by contract or agreement with a psychologist, psychiatrist, or clinical social worker; sometimes an agency satisfies this need with an experienced employee, who may or may not be "credentialed." Whether chosen from staff or outside the agency, a clinical supervisor/consultant should be readily available to provide expertise in what are often highly charged situations and to consult with staff about mental health issues that arise in working with participants.

What to Expect in a Group

Group facilitation is the ability to manage the group process effectively and to interact with participants in a way that enhances their ability to achieve the group's objectives.

Stages of Group Development

Groups have a normal life cycle with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. They develop over time, and they behave differently during different periods in their development. Understanding where the group is in its life cycle can prevent misunderstandings and may help to explain why certain behavior is occurring.

The Beginning. At the beginning of any group, members are thinking, "Do I want to be a member of this group? Am I a member of this group? What are other people thinking about me? Will I be accepted? What are the rules?" In this early stage, group members feel confused, tense, and anxious; they depend heavily on the leader for direction and acceptance.

The facilitator's role at the beginning of the group's life cycle is to:

- Clarify the purpose of the program and group.
- Make everyone aware of the ground rules.
- Help all members feel that they belong.
- Help members learn to trust each other and the facilitator.

The facilitator must take special care from the outset. Groups start with a bang: You must learn the names of the group members, work to help members know and accept one another, and shape the group's dynamic. The facilitator is responsible for setting the tone: Is this a group in which each member's view is respected? Is everyone expected to participate? Does the group take its task seriously? *Above all else when the group is forming, learn members' names and have an agreement with each participant about why he is coming to the group.*

In the first few sessions, the group will test the facilitator as the members come to know who that person is. Session 1 of the curriculum is designed to help break the ice with a game that is a sort of test. To pass, the facilitator must show that he or she is committed to the group and to each member and that he or she seriously wants to help them.

The Middle. As time goes by, the group will settle into its routine, and trust will develop and deepen among group members and between them and the leader. Now that the group has actually formed, members are asking, "Who are the other members of the group? How do they affect me? Is everyone sticking to the ground rules? Is everyone treated equally? What do I have in common with them?"

Several dynamics develop during the middle stage of a group's life cycle:

- Members depend less on the facilitator as time goes by (making the job easier and

giving more time to focus on what the men are saying). The facilitator should not try to control the group but instead should help build a secure environment and then lead the group safely and effectively through the curriculum. The men need to take ownership in the group process, in order to engage and benefit fully from the experience.

- Members are attracted to other participants who seem most like themselves, and subgroups may form on the basis of similarities. A bit later, members often look for acceptance from participants who are less like themselves as they find other commonalities.
- Members begin to challenge one another.
- As members come to trust each other, individuals often try out new things. Some will begin to dress differently; talkative members will try listening more; quiet members will begin to talk more.

The Ending. As the group nears its last sessions, more feelings will be expressed. During the group's life cycle, members have shared, trusted, reached consensus, and managed conflict; they have experienced feelings of closeness or distance, jealousy, warmth, love, hate, and/or friendship. The facilitator's role now is to help members think about the group, apply what they have learned to their own lives, say goodbye to the group leader and to each other, and begin to look toward the future.

Endings are often difficult. Members may have a lot of trouble leaving their safe haven and their new friends. They may not know how to handle this. Some regular attenders may drop out before the last sessions, because they don't know how to say goodbye or because they are upset that the group must

end. Others may get angry with the facilitator, feeling that he or she is abandoning them. This is an opportunity to talk about the ending of the group and to encourage members to discuss their feelings.

Every group should mark its ending with a celebration. For many members, completing the curriculum may be an important personal accomplishment; they may want to invite their children and other family members. This is an important opportunity for members to reinforce what they have learned by summing up the experience for themselves and for others.

Risk-Taking by Group Members

Participants use the group experience to take risks that they are unable to attempt in everyday life. One form of risk-taking occurs when group members openly express their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and experiences. Trying out a new behavior or skill is another form of risk-taking. Risk-taking is difficult, because people are afraid of feeling vulnerable and of being judged, ridiculed, or disliked. Keep the following points in mind to facilitate members' risk-taking:

- Support appropriate risk-taking, such as personal sharing, that contributes to the progress of the group. After a participant has stated an honest feeling or opinion, acknowledge him in a positive way. This will encourage other members to talk honestly about their feelings and opinions.
- Minimize inappropriate risk-taking that is counterproductive to the group. For example, if a participant starts sharing something that is more appropriate for discussion with a counselor, such as sexual abuse or substance abuse, stop and ask

whether the two of you can talk *after* the session. Do this gently, so that the man does not feel silenced or rejected. You might say something like, “Thank you for taking such a big risk by sharing that. It sounds like something that is very difficult to talk about in a group. Let’s talk after this session about the best way for you to share your experience with the group.”

- Don’t ask participants to risk more than you are willing to risk. It is difficult for anyone to take risks in front of strangers, and you should support individuals when they do so. Initially, it may be difficult for members to talk about their feelings or to admit that they lack information about a variety of topics.
- Remember that the group will move through stages of development. Risk-taking can begin after members feel safe in the group. Pay close attention to the father who takes risks early on, and try to understand the reason for this type of sharing.

As facilitator, find a balance between sharing your own thoughts and feelings and maintaining objectivity within the group. Talking about your own experiences can be part of the trust-building process, but excessive sharing by the facilitator is inappropriate and will probably intimidate participants.

Group Facilitation Techniques

Encourage Group Discussion. Ask open-ended and/or provocative questions. Encourage each member to participate in his own unique way. Listen to and understand both content and feeling, and respond to both.

Know What Is Happening in Other Program Activities. The PFS program was

delivered by several agencies (the courts, the child support enforcement agency, the welfare agency, and employment agencies). If your groups are also part of a broader program, it is important to understand the various roles and requirements of the agencies involved and help participants sort them out. Working with other program staff will give you insights into what other groups are doing and how the participants relate to each other in the various components of the program. This will help make your groups more interesting and will help you aim the materials in the curriculum toward what participants are already thinking about.

Help Members Understand What Occurs Within the Group. Point out similarities and differences among members’ contributions. Call the group’s attention to comments that have been overlooked. Encourage members to engage in discussion with each other rather than directing their comments to you. Elicit or contribute summarizing comments about the important concepts in a specific activity or session. Remind participants of insights they may have come to in a previous session.

Attend to the Group. Maintain eye contact with *all* group members. Be aware of participants’ body language, facial expressions, involvement in the program, etc. Also monitor your own nonverbal communication, to avoid unintentionally communicating disapproval or disagreement.

Pace the Program Appropriately. Move things along quickly enough to engage participants, but go slowly enough to ensure that the men are absorbing what is being discussed.

Use Humor. A sense of humor can go a long way in maintaining a group’s interest. It’s

great to laugh at yourself or at situations, or just to have fun in whatever way is natural for you. Don't force humor, however, and *never make a joke at a group member's expense.*

Be Yourself. Allow your own personality to emerge as you lead the group. The more you come across as an authentic human being with emotions, a sense of humor, strengths, and weaknesses, the more that participants will want to relate to you.

Know Your Limitations. It's OK not to know everything. Be aware of your knowledge gaps, as well as your vulnerable issues, and know when to refer participants to other resources.

Take Care of Yourself. The facilitator often will get very close to the group members, but it is important, as a professional, to keep enough distance to remain objective. Feel free not to answer personal questions, especially sexual questions. You and the participants *both* have a right to privacy. Nonetheless, you are an important model for the men. They will want to know how you handle situations and resolve issues. Share as much about yourself as is comfortable, but remember not to share your own experiences just to meet your own needs.

Using Curriculum Activities Effectively

Many activities in this curriculum are best conducted in a five-step sequence:

- 1. Bridge.** Connect the new activity to the one that preceded it, so that group experiences follow logical order.
- 2. Introduce.** Explain the purpose of each activity so that participants can benefit fully from it.
- 3. Be Clear.** Give clear instructions about the activity. Plan how to divide participants into small groups and exactly what the groups will do. Give detailed instructions before participants begin to form the groups, so that the instructions can be heard. Reinforce verbal instructions by writing and posting them in front of the room.
- 4. Process.** Help participants examine what occurred during the activity so that they can learn from it. Have them react to both the content and the interaction that took place during each activity. Draw connections between the participants' group experiences and their life experiences outside the group.
- 5. Summarize.** Highlight the important points that advance the objectives of the activity. Restate the key concepts underlying the activity.

Tips in Facilitating Peer Support Groups

Ethnic Awareness

Much group discussion will reflect participants' various cultural influences. Learn about the fathers' different cultural heritages, and understand the critical role their backgrounds play in transmitting values. Friction may arise between a participant's ethnic traditions and mainstream American culture, and the fathers' expectations may vary depending on their traditions. Attitudes about birth control, work, and fathering are likely to conflict among participants, and the viewpoints of older men may be at odds with those of younger men. The facilitator needs to provide constructive guidance (without imposing value judgments) to help individuals and the whole group come to terms with such conflicts. If the participants are ethnically diverse, they are likely to hold stereotypical views of one another; stereotypes will have to be discussed in order for the group members to support each other.

To be responsive to ethnic and cultural differences among participants, the leader should:

- Be aware and develop an understanding of the men's diverse backgrounds.
- Consult knowledgeable professionals about ethnic differences; seek additional information, and get feedback from the men themselves.
- Respect the reluctance or unwillingness of some ethnic groups to discuss topics that they consider private. Do not push individuals to participate without considering

that their backgrounds may make them reticent.

- Be sensitive to individual abilities to handle English, both written and spoken.
- Avoid stereotypes. Stereotyping denies individuality and does not take into account the diversity within a group. For example:

The word *Hispanic* means neither an ethnic group nor a race. It includes people from many locations, including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spain, and South and Central America — all of which have different cultures and many races. Not all Hispanics (or those with Spanish surnames) speak Spanish, are Catholic, or come from large families.

Asians include Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, Mien, Lao, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Indians, and many other groups — again, all distinct in cultural traditions and languages.

African-Americans come from all regions of the United States and have diverse religious and cultural traditions. The word *blacks* includes both African-Americans and many populations from outside the United States, including Africans, West Africans, Caribbean peoples, and Latinos.

- In being sensitive to the dangers of stereotyping, avoid treating any participant differently on the basis of culture; that may be interpreted by others as preferential treatment.

- Make an effort to provide role models who represent the variety of ethnic backgrounds in the group in order to increase the fathers' self-esteem by giving them a greater sense of their own potential.

The Length of Sessions

The length of time given to PFS peer support sessions varied across sites and from group to group. A group of eight can complete two exercises in an hour, while a group of 15 may have trouble completing them in two hours. Group dynamics vary as well: Some groups take two hours for every session, while others complete the same activities in half an hour, with time to spare.

If a group does take off and is animated during every exercise, it is probably a good idea to move on to the next activity in 45 minutes, covering two activities in each session. A group that works well together will express what needs to be said in the next activity or in the "Feedback/Wrap-up" at the end of the session. The group will be further stimulated and enriched by the additional material.

Groups that last longer than 90 minutes need to break for a stretch, a trip to the bathroom, or a cigarette. A break can be seen as part of the group activity, because members use it to get to know one another. But the break is not a break for the facilitator, who can use that time to seek out quiet members and learn how they are doing or can chat with subgroups to get to know the men informally. A facilitator *should not* use this time to do paperwork, make a phone call, or talk with other staff (except when it directly relates to the group's work).

"Feedback/Wrap-up" Activities

The last 10 to 15 minutes of each session are set aside for "Feedback/Wrap-up." During this time, every member of the group should be encouraged to talk. This gives each man a chance to sum up his experience and to think about what has just happened in the group. It also gives each man a chance to air any negative feelings, so that the session doesn't end with his feeling that no one listened to his concerns. Feedback helps each man to feel that he matters to the group.

"Feedback/Wrap-up" also gives the facilitator an opportunity to take the pulse of the group as a whole and to listen to its members individually. Hearing the men's reactions to the session, the leader can see whether the activities worked as planned, which parts didn't work, and which parts worked much better than he or she imagined. This information equips the leader to plan the next session; more important, it gives the opportunity to consider how each member is doing. For instance, if someone has been quiet throughout the session, was he listening and fully involved, was something bothering him, or was he daydreaming and not really participating? "Feedback/Wrap-up" helps the facilitator to interpret such behavior and to uncover problems.

Adding New Members to an Existing Group

During the course of sessions, new members may be added to the group. This can either disrupt the group or be used as an opportunity. A great first step is to have a one-on-one meeting with the new member as you did with all members before the group started.

When a new man joins the group, spend the first half hour of that session introducing him. Go around the room and ask each member to introduce himself. State the topic of the last session, and ask the original members to tell the newcomer what they learned about it; this reinforces the material for the original members. Alternatively, have each man talk about what the group means to him and why he continues to participate. This is also a good opportunity for the facilitator to review the group's goals and ground rules.

Consider asking one of the established members to become a kind of sponsor for the new member. The sponsor's job would be to summarize what the group has talked about, to explain things the new member may not understand, and generally to support the new man as he begins to participate in the group. Being a sponsor is a growth opportunity for the established member, because the best way to learn is to explain material to someone else.

Coping with Members Who Attend Irregularly

Members who often miss sessions present three problems. In PFS, the first concerned what to do about the person's future participation in the program. Each site had to address this issue by developing a policy that clearly stated the consequences of missing a session. The next two problems, however, affect the whole group: how to reinvolve someone who has missed sessions and is returning to the group and what the facilitator should do when several members are absent.

When a member has missed one or several sessions, the facilitator may want to have a one-on-one meeting with him before reintroducing him to the group — especially if he

has missed the sessions because he was not cooperating with the program. However, a one-on-one meeting might be helpful even if the member missed sessions because of illness or some other unavoidable cause. When the individual is reintroduced to the group, the facilitator might use the "What's New?" segment of the session to ask other members to summarize the last session. This is a useful review for all members, as well an opportunity for the absent member to catch up. It may also be useful to have the absent member explain to the group why he has been away, in order to help him take responsibility for his actions and to prevent speculation among other members.

When a substantial number of members are absent, the group's character will change. If the facilitator knows in advance that a large number will not be attending, he or she may want to plan an alternative activity and not continue with the curriculum sequence. But sometimes the facilitator won't know until the last minute that a large segment of the group is absent and that there are not enough members to conduct the planned activities. It is important not to "punish" those who did attend by slowing them down. Consider using a discussion format to cover planned material, and then schedule a make-up session for the men who did not attend. In the interest of fairness, members who miss sessions should be asked to make up the related activities.

Absenteeism signals that the facilitator needs to examine the group's structure. Providing an effective peer support may mean having to evaluate what's working and what needs to be changed. Is the group meeting in the right place at the right time? Is the curriculum engaging the participants? Is the facilitator's style effective, or should it be adapted more to the group's needs?

Managing Behavior Problems in a Group

No matter how experienced the facilitator is, at times the group will be distracted by individual members. After looking at general guidelines for avoiding behavior problems, we will examine some common problems and how to handle them.

General Guidelines

- Listen carefully to what the group members are saying; behavior problems are often problems of communication.
 - Define the group's rules and expectations early.
 - Involve participants in developing the rules — and the consequences for breaking them.
 - Apply the consequences for breaking rules consistently and fairly.
 - Develop a personal relationship with each participant. Besides the one-on-one interviews with each participant before the program begins, consider asking individuals to meet with you as the need arises.
 - Give participants compliments and words of support.
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Common Behavior Problems

Most groups display certain typical roles. There is usually a clown, for instance, and someone who is always willing to talk, and someone who tends to make trouble. Roles

that help or hinder the group in accomplishing its goal are called *task roles*; roles that help or hinder the group in its work as a unit are called *social roles*. Both types of roles can be either positive or negative influences on a group. But certain types of problems almost always emerge, as discussed below.

The Monopolizer. The monopolizer talks too much. Sometimes he is knowledgeable, and it is tempting to let him take over. This is never a good idea. The monopolizer is likely to say inappropriate things to other members and to distract the group from its task. He also can cause resentment among other members. The facilitator should feel authorized to interrupt a monopolizer; to talk with him privately, away from the group; or, as leader, to ask the group to help address the problem. Sometimes it helps to avoid making eye contact with the monopolizer. If he is well intentioned, acknowledge his contribution but remind him that others need to contribute as well. The facilitator is the group leader and should not let anyone else play this role.

The Silent Member. The silent member may be shy, may fear being “wrong” in front of the group, or may simply be a quiet learner. If he is not making eye contact, it is difficult to know whether he is paying attention. (Remember that some members are quiet because of their cultural backgrounds.) Strategies for involving a silent member include calling on him by name but allowing him to pass if he seems uncomfortable, chatting with him informally after the session or during breaks to see how things are going,

checking with other staff about his behavior in other activities, and pairing him with more talkative people during an activity. Reinforce any responses (verbal or otherwise) that a silent member makes, and watch for any non-verbal cues indicating that he would like to comment.

The Entertainer (Class Clown). Some group members always have to be on stage. The class clown may be amusing, but he will disrupt the group's work. Here are some suggestions:

- Stand close to the entertainer (class clown).
- Give him some extra responsibility so that his energy can be used in a positive rather than negative way.
- Recognize that, if the clowning is not disruptive, it can serve a useful function by helping the group release pent-up energy or anxiety.

Side Conversations. Side conversations are frustrating for the facilitator. They occur because close friends sit together, or something interesting but not related to the activity has happened, or members are not interested in the topic, or the topic is *so* interesting that members cannot wait their turn to speak. Here are some strategies for handling side conversations:

- Make a statement like the following to the entire group: "I'm hearing a lot of different conversations going on at one time. That makes it hard for us to communicate. Please talk to the whole group when you have something to say."
- Pause during the side conversation, allowing the entire group to hear it.
- Draw the talkers into the group's discussion by asking their opinions or giving them other tasks to perform.

- Give the group a short break, openly acknowledging that some members need to complete their business.
- Approach the talkers during a break to find out why they are having side conversations and to ask for their cooperation in the future.
- Change the activity or the makeup of sub-groups to renew the men's interest and get a fresh start.

Verbal Abuse. Treat verbal abuse as a form of violence. Stop the abuser immediately, and apply the consequences for breaking this rule. No facilitator ever has to accept verbal abuse, and certainly no member of the group should be subjected to it by another member. Call for a cooling down period in which both the abuser and the abused person can take a break before trying to work things out. If the situation is very tense, you may have to call on a mediator for help.

Personality Conflicts. It would be unusual for any group leader to like all the members of the group equally. In fact, a participant may try to avoid his responsibility by creating a personality conflict with the facilitator. But if you have an initial agreement about the purpose of the group, you can overcome some of this by saying, "Even though we are not compatible, we can still work together for the sake of your child." The group itself also can be used to help in situations involving personality conflicts. Conflict is a normal part of life, and working out conflicts in the group can help each participant learn about conflict resolution.

If the personality conflict becomes a serious problem, the facilitator's supervisor (or someone else in authority) can arbitrate the dispute. This may mean only that the supervisor backs the facilitator and confirms his or her

position. Again, however, the conflict can be an important opportunity, if the situation is handled carefully. Rather than being treated as simply an administrative matter, resolving the dispute can be part of the process through which the father comes to terms with responsibility. Even though the arbitrator/supervisor will support the facilitator, the informal hearing may assist the man in taking responsibility and may allow him to return to the peer support group feeling that he has been taken seriously.

Development of Subgroups. Two or more individuals often develop a subgroup on the basis of common roles, beliefs, attitudes, emotional responses, or likes and dislikes; subgroups also tend to form on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, age, and so on. Subgroups can provide support and protection for individuals within the larger group, particularly for members who hold less prominent positions. People in subgroups often communicate differently than in the larger group, whether they are discussing a specific topic or information about other members. For example, young people in subgroups may be more honest with one another, expressing opinions or feelings that they don't feel comfortable stating in the larger group. The facilitator should reach out to subgroups and get to know each member. It is unrealistic to discourage such natural groupings, and it may be possible, little by little, to help subgroup members participate in the larger group.

Polarization. *Polarization* is the pulling away of individuals or subgroups from one another and from the larger group's purpose of helping them be supportive, providing fathers. Sometimes people pull away when they perceive that what they believe in has been discounted or denounced. Other times, two or more individuals or subgroups actively disagree, become angry with each other, and fail to resolve their conflict. In most cases it is easy to notice polarization dynamics: Members may move away from the group, may sit outside the group arrangement, or may not participate constructively in the work of the group. If polarization occurs, you might:

- Do nothing, except observe and personally acknowledge that polarization may be taking place. This approach is especially appropriate if the polarized member is a young man who is trying to get attention. Alternatively, try to find a different, more positive way to give him attention.
- Handle put-downs and disagreements appropriately when they occur, to help prevent polarization.
- Encourage polarized members to rejoin the group.
- Stop the work of the group, and provide an opportunity for members to talk about how they are feeling.
- Speak individually with members who may be feeling polarized, before or after the group meeting.