Involving Dads Early on Has Benefits

The Challenge: A recent study concluded that infants without strong father involvement experience higher rates of infant mortality compared to those with an involved father, regardless of race. Most prenatal interventions are aimed at mothers exclusively, and yet, there is a growing recognition about the value and importance of involving fathers early on, before and during pregnancy. Many practitioners are now exploring innovative ways to meet the needs of fathers during the prenatal period.

Project Goal: St. Joseph Hospital in Milwaukee has found great success with Centering Pregnancy, an evidence-based group prenatal care program at its Women’s Outpatient Center. The project set out to increase father involvement. Specifically, the project aimed to enhance the Centering Pregnancy curriculum by addressing fathers’ needs and concerns and pilot-test the new program. The pilot program integrated the 24/7 Dad program with Centering Pregnancy. The 24/7 Dad program helps men improve their parenting skills and fathering knowledge.

Results: Through focus groups and individual interviews with expectant fathers, the project team collected data on various topics, such as stress management, physical and mental health, sexual relations, family culture and values, self-awareness, body image, communication and conflict management, a father’s role, manhood and self-esteem.

Participating couples carried their babies to term, delivering between 39 and 41 weeks’ gestation. All babies had a healthy birthweight, and all women had spontaneous vaginal deliveries. Findings from the pilot suggest that fathers were interested in and likely to attend prenatal group sessions.

The project also made observations regarding strategies to improve institutional practices for creating a welcoming place for fathers. For example, scheduling health services around the patient’s availability rather than the clinician’s schedule or working with trusted and experienced community partners to serve as group facilitators. Because of the limited number of participants in the pilot, additional pilot testing is needed with a larger sample and follow up with program participants to track progress after their baby’s birth.

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