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Abstract

Fatherhood education has the potential to affect not only fathers' nurturant behaviors but also multiple dimensions of family life. The weGrill program blends fatherhood, youth development, and nutrition education, with food grilling as the focal activity. Grounded in multiple learning theories, the program helps fathers and their adolescent children learn broadly about family life topics, planning for the future, and nutrition and healthful food behaviors. The program represents a re-envisioned approach to fatherhood education.

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Introduction

For several decades, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have acknowledged the need to strengthen family relationships through educational programs that target one or both parents (Fagan & Palm, 2004). The direction of influence typically flows from educator to parent and then from parent to child and family. Extensive efforts have been placed on influencing one particular population, fathers, with the goal of encouraging their nurturant involvement at home (Knox, Cowan, Cowan, & Bildner, 2011), including promoting a climate of health therein (Niermann, Kremer, Renner, & Woll, 2015).

The fatherhood education paradigm has long consisted of intensive multihour sessions occurring over the course

of several weeks (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Such programs engage participants in discussions, writing activities, role-plays, experiential learning, and video vignettes. With a few exceptions (e.g., Strengthening Families Program, Fathers and Sons Program), parent education programs generally, and fatherhood education programs specifically, typically do not include the participation of the child. Programs that do involve children are structured to provide instruction to parents and children (Semeniuk et al., 2010).

According to data collected in 2011–2012, 20.5% of adolescents and 34.9% of adults are obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). Evidence has suggested that eating as a family is associated with fewer incidences of unhealthy eating and obesity during childhood and adolescence (Martin-Biggers et al., 2014). In addition, intervention strategies such as father-child goal setting and interactive group activities to promote healthful family meals may also be effective in strengthening relationships. Moreover, dynamic educational approaches that strengthen relationships and promote positive nutrition may also affect other areas of personal and family life (Fitzgerald & Spaccarotella, 2009).

In this article, we outline a re-envisioned approach to fatherhood education: a program that incorporates effective models of change (e.g., health action process approach [HAPA]), multigenerational learning (fathers and children), experiential learning (activities, cooking/grilling), and gamification (cards). The program is called weGrill. Participants are fathers and their children (youths aged 11–16 years). The approach is intended to broaden the existing fatherhood education paradigm and provide practitioners with new ideas for encouraging nurturant father involvement, more meaningful father-child relationships, and more healthful home environments.

Program Description

The weGrill curriculum has three educational focuses: (a) fatherhood education, (b) youth development education, and (c) nutrition education. The overall goal of the program is to strengthen the father-youth relationship; and food grilling is the central activity by which that strengthening occurs. Families learn about and apply healthful food preparation practices and food safety principles grounded in the 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015). The main instructional artifacts are hand-held cards, used for recipes, food safety information, fatherhood topics, and youth development topics. Program hosts lead gamified activities and discussions of fatherhood, youth development, and nutritious grilling. Session themes and topics scaffold learning because they build on previous session material.

Program Objectives

Specific program objectives exist to guide program design and implementation. First, the program is intended to enhance the father-youth relationship by increasing fathers' knowledge and capacity for nurturant and supportive parenting. Second, it is intended to promote youths' capabilities in the areas of teamwork, communication, leadership, self-determination, mastery, and technology adaptation. Third, the program is intended to increase knowledge of nutrition, healthful eating, safe food preparation, and healthful food access in the community. It is also anticipated that fathers and youths will increase the frequency with which they eat meals together and demonstrate new habits of healthful eating and less habitual eating of unhealthy foods.

Theoretical Foundations

The program relies on the HAPA model (Schwarzer, 2008) and gamification as instructional frameworks. The HAPA model uses a two-phase motivation-volition approach to engender planned participant success strategies. Gamification is the application of games or game-like activities to nongame activities for the purpose of encouraging engagement and investment by participants. The program design also incorporates multiple learning theories, including Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory and his concepts of scaffolding and learning from a more capable peer (Vygotsky, 1978) and Bandura's social learning theory with an emphasis on the concepts of agency, self-efficacy, and modeling (Bandura, 2004). Specifically, hosts draw on participants' real-world experiences (a) to encourage fathers to reinforce their children's understanding of material and (b) to engage youths in teaching and learning from other youths. As a result, participants take ownership of their learning and make it personally relevant to their own circumstances so that application occurs during the session and at home.

Program Schedule

weGrill is structured to give fathers and youths time to learn together, time to learn in small groups, and time to grill and eat together. Each session is arranged so that half of the session is dedicated to nutrition/food safety instruction, grilling, and eating and half is dedicated to fatherhood and youth development instruction. Through the use of instructional recipe and food preparation cards, grilling and eating are done in family dyads, allowing communication and teamwork to occur. For about half of the fatherhood/youth development instruction period, family members separate, with fathers meeting to learn about and discuss nurturant fathering behaviors and youths meeting to learn about leadership, communication, and family life. Once the small-group activities are finished, fathers and youths reconvene to complete a session-closing activity.

Implications for Extension Professionals

The re-envisioned approach to fatherhood education described here blends fatherhood, youth development, and nutrition education into a single program with food grilling as the centerpiece activity. Extension professionals who work with fathers may consider implementing the following pedagogical, programmatic, and practical recommendations:

- Create male-friendly activities, such as grilling, to engage fathers at recruitment and throughout program sessions.
- Include the father's child in the program, and provide opportunities for the two of them to interact with each other in positive ways.
- Draw on fathers' real-world experiences to scaffold new material into their existing social cognitive schemata.
- Play games that are engaging and that reinforce the material.
- Seek to affect multiple areas of life to increase the likelihood that attitude and behavior change will become part of everyday life.
- Involve personnel from different Extension areas (i.e., family and consumer sciences, agriculture, 4-H) and members of the community to teach the program.

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