

Spotlight on CT WIC Partner Real Dads Forever

A fatherhood strategies development organization



Partnership with WIC

Since 2018, the Connecticut WIC Program has been partnering with [Real Dads Forever](#) in support of its Fatherhood Initiative.

“We started out training all their staff around the theme of partnering with family men-why and how,” said Doug Edwards, Founder and Director of Real Dads Forever. “The why part is so important to understand their specific value, especially as it relates to child development and to address any unconscious bias folks may have. Somebody that's been through a bad divorce, suffered abuse or abandonment; there's an innate sense of danger and it's legitimate. So how do you overcome it and develop a good working relationship when a man comes into the WIC office?”

The training covered what dads do to support children socially, emotionally, and economically and to identify the skills and assets unique to dads in their relationships with children and family. “We got into small breakout groups, and it was amazing the ideas that people had, but weren't putting into practice,” said Edwards, “So we came up with strategies and methods for enacting them and they were really excited about it.”

Edwards then conducted father friendly site assessments at three pilot sites to look at their approaches to fatherhood. When enrolling moms into their programs, Edwards found less than 30% of state agencies ask for the father's name. “We don't encourage dads to step up and then we wonder why they don't show up,” said Edwards.

During the onsite assessments, Edwards looked at the physical environment of the WIC offices, their marketing materials, policies, and practices. Edwards interviewed staff and parents and the pilot sites exchanged ideas about what things were and weren't working. Recommendations included the following:

- Put a space for dad's name on the chart.
- If both mom and dad are at the appointment, call both of their names to come in.
- Make sure there is a chair for dad as well in the appointment cubicle.
- Update marketing materials to show not only moms, but dads as well.

- Create referrals to other agencies and resources that are beyond the purview of WIC, such as parenting, jobs and child support.

Edwards noted it's often a lot of simple things that can cause a dad to feel out of place and it's relatively simple to change things up to be more representative and welcoming. After a few months Edwards checked back in and saw substantive changes had been implemented.

The next training was on effective communication to reframe Women, Infants, and Children to make it obvious that WIC wants to include dads as well. Topics covered included: What were the challenges WIC staff had with conversations with moms about family men? When mom comes in without dad, is it okay to ask if dad's involved? Is it okay to show that we really want dad to come in if he's available?

"We then explored and did some role playing around the challenge of conversation with the men themselves when they do come in," said Edwards. "How do you start the conversation and not be intrusive? What about moms who have experienced domestic violence or children abandoned by the father? How do we help mom to see that dad plays an integral part in the relationship with the child, and if dad isn't present, what about a grandpa, uncle, coach or someone from the faith community to help provide that role?"

During the pandemic, Edwards did a training called Bridging Troubled Waters. "I use the metaphor that the WIC staff is the bridge and they are there to help families get to the other side to a point of safety during this unprecedented time of uncertainty and stress. And it wasn't just for WIC families, but WIC staff themselves as they were dealing with the same pressures and stressors. I did it in small groups at individual sites and they really developed a deeper bond and support for one another sharing strategies on self-care."

"Doug's work not only impacts WIC, but he and his colleagues' breastfeeding support work and passion is helping the larger community and dovetails nicely with the SPAN activities*," said Marcia Pessolano, WIC Director for the State of Connecticut. "Further, being able to promote and support breastfeeding from the perspective of the father is powerful and also reveals some additional challenges that need to be addressed in this space. Listening to Doug and the other father advocates' experiences with families has been invaluable for both WIC and CT Department of Public Health staff as we plan breastfeeding activities that are responsive to the populations we serve."

Breastfeeding Support

As a father of five, Edwards knows a thing or two about breastfeeding. Edwards and a few other fatherhood advocates took the Healthy Children Project, Inc., Certified Lactation Counselor® (CLC) training to better support dads on their breastfeeding journey with moms. And when he first conceived the idea of developing a Paternal Prenatal Early Attachment curriculum, Edwards "knew that breastfeeding had to be part of it as there are many things dads can do to support it."

"The best preparation is for mom and dad to understand the value of breastfeeding in terms of bonding, nutrition, the process and what to look out for well before the baby is born," explained Edwards. "The first thing I do when engaging new parents is show them a video of baby's birth and instinct in finding the breast right after birth; all on its own. I want them to feel the magic of that moment and to understand how the breast prepares itself to release the colostrum, the first milk produced by the

breast right after birth rich in nutrients that baby needs. I want dad to be able to see and understand what's happening and for both parents to be able to find some joy in this stressful birthing experience. "

Edwards says those early experiences around breastfeeding can shape the destiny of breastfeeding. "If it goes wrong in the beginning, maybe they're so discouraged that they don't want to try," explained Edwards. "In our training, we found that about 80% of issues around breastfeeding is about the latch, and dads can help with the latch. Helping moms successfully breastfeed, at least for six months, is a really powerful start for the baby."

Edwards is also a member of the Connecticut Breastfeeding Coalition and has joined up with Yale University and Healthy Start Groups in doing focus groups to interview men who have been with mom in the first three years of the child's life to find out what breastfeeding support was like for them. This follows a needs assessment he conducted after doing grand rounds with some doctors, nurses, doulas, and midwives to gauge how dads were treated in these medical settings and found out there was quite a bit of bias. "A lot of it is unintentional, and based on fear, especially as it relates to minority men," said Edwards, "So I knew that that was something that had to be addressed." All of this follows an earlier Columbia University study showing disparities in how minority women are treated in hospitals, clinics, and doctor's offices.

Overview of organization- How it all began

Years ago, Doug Edwards left his business in medical imaging to turn his volunteer work with dads into his career. "I was working with groups of dads in the evenings, and it was very exciting to watch them get an epiphany as we had these group discussions. Suddenly, they realized their own specific value, the importance of reflection as they looked back to see how they were brought up and how that impacted their thinking around bringing up their own child. I'd return home at 9 pm and tell my wife that I got paid and she would say, 'but Doug you're a volunteer'. But the payment for me was watching that transformation happen, and here we are more than 25 years later, and I'm still getting paid."

"We have many generational father absence issues," said Edwards. "Too many young men have grown up without a dad and are absent in their own children's lives. And there's often an acceptance on the part of mom that an absent dad is normal. But a dad's presence in the life of a child is that affirmation for them and when boys or girls don't get it from a dad, they will turn elsewhere for it even if it's the wrong type of affirmation. Children that are securely connected to their fathers succeed socially, emotionally and academically."

"When I very first started conducting fatherhood groups, we put up fliers and got a bunch of food and no one showed up," said Edwards. "So, we changed the wording on the flyer to highlight that dads have something to share with others rather than we are here to help you and that turned it around. Words matter in marketing. We had 18 guys show up. We had a mixture of folks, we had a dad that brought his teenage son, a grandfather, some with substance abuse issues, some from nuclear families, black, white, and Latino, a great mix of guys. I thought it would run for four weeks but they did not want to quit, and we ran 18 weeks. We talked about what it was like when your dad wasn't around. For some it was traumatic the loss of that connection and role model. How then does that transfer into my relationship with my girlfriend or my wife and child? Where do I learn about relationships? We explored the emotional and vulnerability aspect of it and getting them to open up. From it I came up with a guiding principle I call Backing into Empathy where we look backward and really get into it and explore what

happened, who was there, who wasn't there, how did it feel? Every aspect of fatherhood work I do is based this principle.”

As Director of Real Dads Forever, Edwards travels throughout New England and around the country, facilitating workshops, training staff, and motivating parents toward success.

Contact information

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**State Physical Activity and Nutrition Program Recipients. CDC funds 16 state recipients to implement evidence-based strategies at state and local levels to improve nutrition and physical activity.*