

The Good Business of Being Father-Friendly

by Bruce Cunningham

Child care and car repair are different, of course, but a letter published in the Dear Abby advice column several years ago leads us to consider the similarities between them.

The writer of the letter was a single woman who complained about the service she received when she took her car to be repaired. The workers did not greet her in a friendly manner and assumed that she wouldn't know what was wrong with her car or what it would take to repair it. Even the magazines in the waiting room were of more interest to male customers. She concluded that women customers were totally ignored.

Then one day a new manager appeared at the car repair shop. He greeted her politely when she brought her car in, took the time to chat, offered a cup of coffee, and set out magazines that women enjoy. The writer intended to return to this car repair shop again because of the friendly service. Dear Abby responded that the new manager

was obviously a smart business person and advised the writer to let others know about the friendly service at this car repair shop.

It is easy to see how car repair shops are more friendly to male customers. Car repair is commonly seen as something belonging to the realm of men, and most of the workers in car repair shops are men. This situation is similar to child care. The care and rearing of children is commonly seen as something belonging to the realm of women, and most of the workers in child care settings are women. So it is easy to see how child care settings can be more friendly to mothers. Yet the traditional roles of men and women have changed over the years. The writer of the letter to Dear Abby made it clear she is only one of many women who takes the

responsibility for car repair. And these days, men are much more involved in the care of their children.

The benefits of welcoming fathers and other men into child care settings are very clear. As Dear Abby pointed out, satisfied customers mean repeat business and good word-of-mouth advertising. A child care setting that welcomes fathers and other men is also more likely to succeed in involving men — in parent conferences and meetings, in volunteer work, and, more importantly, in the lives of their children. So the question is, how can child care settings go about the good business of being father-friendly?

Six areas of father-friendly service are described in the remainder of this article. Keep in mind that the idea of father-friendly service includes not only biological fathers but other men who have a positive and significant relationship with a child. As you read each area, ask yourself how well your child care setting does in response to the questions in each of the areas.

■ **Check your attitude.** Providing friendly service is based largely on a friendly attitude to those you are serving. What are the attitudes of staff toward fathers and other men? Do staff feel men truly play an important role in the lives of children? Are staff comfortable with some men and not others?

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Why do staff feel as they do toward men? What training have staff had on involving fathers and other men?

■ **Know the men.** If you are going to provide friendly service to fathers and other men, you have to know some things about them to determine what it is that will make them feel welcome. The point is that men themselves are a diverse group, so it is important to consider the population of men you serve. In general, do you know who the men are? What are their cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds? What are their occupations and income levels? Are the men older or younger? Is the population of men homogeneous or diverse? Are the men primarily biological fathers of the children you serve or are they grandfathers, uncles, stepfathers, or boyfriends of mothers? More specifically, do you know of a man for each child who has a positive relationship with that child? Do you know the names of these men?

■ **Communicating with the men.** For men to feel welcome, they need to be acknowledged. Information that is shared must relate to their lives and come in a way that can

readily be received. When men drop off or pick up children, do staff greet them warmly by name and chat with them? When staff call the home, do they automatically ask to speak with the mother if a man answers? In parent conferences, are as many questions and comments directed to the man as the woman? Do parent letters and meetings contain information of interest to men, such as things men would enjoy doing with their children or information relevant to men's health, financial, or legal circumstances? Are parent letters mailed to the address of the father if his address is not the same as that of the mother and child? Have you asked or surveyed the men about what they think about the service you provide?

■ **Scheduling services.** Men as well as women will feel left out when events and services take place at times when they cannot attend. Do enrollment activities, orientations, parent conferences, and meetings take place at times when everyone can attend? Is enough advance notice of events provided so both parents can arrange time off from work to attend?

■ **The environment.** Men will feel welcome in a setting where they can see something of themselves and their

lives. Do photographs, pictures, or posters of men or of men and children decorate the entryway, parent room, and classrooms? Is parenting information about fathering and fatherhood available and visible? Are magazines displayed that are of interest to men? Is the look of the environment excessively cutesy, frilly, or pink in color? Are parent letters printed on pink paper with cutesy decorations?

■ **Recruit male staff.** Few things say that a child care setting is a place for men better than having men on staff. When you hire staff, do you make an effort to recruit men? Do you seek out men who can volunteer in your program? Do you contact local high schools and colleges to see how young men in need of service learning, practicum, or internship hours can be placed in your setting?

If you feel you are doing well in all of these areas, then congratulate yourself. If there are some things you could do, then there is the place to make positive changes. And with a few changes, the men won't feel totally ignored like the woman who took her car to the repair shop. In a way similar to that of the new manager of that car repair shop, you will be getting on with the good business of being father-friendly.