



# Why We Stressin'

## The Father-Child Stress Connection

A parenting workshop from the My Dad Matters toolkit

## Overview

This workshop will address the impact of stressful interactions on the child's developing brain, and provide strategies for identifying and managing stress to allow for more positive interactions.

The target group is marginalized, racialized and/or part time fathers of young children, including prison populations, child welfare clients, etc.

### Learning Objectives

- Be able to identify personal and social factors that contribute to their stress.
- Understand the impact of their own stress on their child and on the father-child relationship.
- Gain new positive strategies to manage their stress.
- Make a commitment to using one new positive strategy in a future stressful situation.

#### *Facilitator note:*

*Participants in the pilot session suggested that during registration the facilitator ask the participant to speak to their partner about what stressors they are facing and bring it to the workshop.*

## Welcome



### Activity

Welcome the group, introduce yourself, distribute name tags and give housekeeping information (location of washrooms, exits, etc). Give a brief statement that the reason for the workshop is to better understand the connection between our stress and our children's wellbeing, so that we can build positive relationships with our children.

Let the group know that the session is for all men who have a role as fathers, even if their access time is limited.

### Materials You Will Need

- Name tags
- Markers

## Icebreaker: Getting to Know You



### Activity

Divide participants into small groups of three to four individuals. Ask them to tell each other their names and then talk together to answer the following two questions:

- What is something you are most proud of or enjoy as a father?
- What do you find challenging as a father?

Some small groups may need examples to get started, such as:

- I love it when my child laughs and I laugh back.
- The baby cries all the time.
- I have no full-time employment.

Tell the groups they have a few minutes for this conversation. When the time is up, gather the group back together and invite participants to share highlights from their conversation.

If only a few respond, just move on. There will be other opportunities during the session to share information. If the group is small, this conversation could be done in pairs.



## Agenda & Group Agreements

### Activity

Establish group agreements by asking participants what they think will help make the workshop be successful and run smoothly. To help get started, suggest an idea, such as *take turns talking*. This list becomes the group's ground rules to refer to as needed during the session. Facilitators can add guidelines as appropriate, such as agreeing to confidentiality, or to putting away cell phones.

### Materials You Will Need

- Flip chart with agenda
- Blank flip chart paper
- Markers
- Tape

# Group Activity 1

## Naming the Stress



### Activity

Introduce the exercise by acknowledging that we all have stress, and that now we are going to spend a few minutes identifying what are the aspects of our lives that contribute to our stress.

Give each participant an envelope containing six to ten pictures of common stressors (such as baby crying, money, time, etc), along with two blank cards and a marker. See Appendix 1 for sample pictures.

Ask participants to look at the pictures, choose the ones that match their own stressors, and place them under one of the three coloured sheets posted on the wall, according to whether it causes extreme stress, a lot of stress or a manageable amount. The marker and blank cards are for drawing or labelling a stressor that is not on the pictures provided.

You may want to get creative by making a traffic light out of construction paper ahead of time:

- **Red Light:** What causes me extreme stress?
- **Yellow Light:** What causes a lot of stress?
- **Green Light:** What is manageable stress?

### Materials You Will Need

- Red, yellow and green construction paper
- Masking tape
- For each participant, an envelope containing six to ten pictures, about 2" x 4", two blank 2" x 4" cards, and a marker. See Appendix 2 for sample pictures.



## Group Activity 2 Responding to Stress

### Activity

Participants will discuss: Where and how do I feel stress, and what do I do about it?

When the group is finished placing their pictures, ask participants if they have any comments. Give an opportunity for participants to briefly explain what the picture means for them.

Then draw their attention to the posted flip chart paper showing a large size outline of a body. Ask the group to share how they react to their strongest stressors, by asking the following questions:

- Where on your body do you feel this stress when the stressor is happening?
- What happens to you/your body when you feel the stress?
- What do you do when you feel this stress?

If needed, help participants identify how they may experience stress (pounding heart, headaches, sweaty palms, etc.), and how they may currently be coping with it (shouting, leaving the scene, etc.).

As the participants say how and where they feel stress, record the answers by illustrating or writing them on the body outline.

It may be challenging for participants to say what their physical reactions are, because they may be outside their awareness. One reason for this exercise is to help make these reactions more conscious so that they can be managed more effectively.

### Materials You Will Need

- Body outline on flip chart. See sample in Appendix 3.
- Masking tape
- Markers

## Group Activity 3

# The Father-Child Connection



### Activity

Participants will discuss: How does my stress effect my child? Use the *Let's Play Ball* demonstration to highlight points.

Read and adapt the following information into your own words:

You may be wondering what all this has to do with being a father. The answer is – lots. Because of new technology, science can tell us a lot more about how the brain works than it could in the past. We know that our brains are still developing when we are born. All the experiences we have, especially when we are children, have a big effect on how we function as adults, regardless of what genes we are born with.

The brain begins with cells – like this.

*Throw three larger sized balls out to the group.*

These cells (neurons) send signals to each other to communicate.

*Ask the group to throw the balls easily back and forth to each other.*

This back and forth communication creates brain circuits (pathways) that build the foundation for future development. The more the cells communicate, the stronger the brain pathway becomes.

So when your baby smiles and you smile back, you are helping to build a pathway. When your child holds out a toy and you take it and say thanks, you are helping to build a pathway. These pathways begin to build the architecture of the brain. But if you are stressed or preoccupied, when your child holds out a toy for you, you may not notice.

*Demonstrate by asking a participant to throw you a ball and then don't throw it back.*

The child is more than just disappointed when this happens. Humans have a biological need for this back and forth (serve and return) communication. The brain depends on it. So if it doesn't happen, the child feels stress, and may react by crying or throwing things. So now the child is feeling stress. The brain pathway doesn't become strong and future development is compromised.

Another reaction you may have is that you do notice your child holding out a toy to you, but because you feel stressed and anxious – for example, you may be worried about a bill you just received - you respond in a negative manner. You are now transferring your stress reactions to your child and he or she will feel it.

*Point out the body chart with the rapid heartbeat, yelling, sweating palms etc.*

The child begins to anticipate and feel your stress response which makes the child anxious and leads to disruption in learning and functioning. The same things that happen in your mind and body may now be occurring in the child.

Let's throw some more balls around to illustrate what these unpredictable or negative responses might feel like for the child.

*First divide the full group into smaller group of 3 – 4 participants. Throw the smaller balls to the participants and ask them to toss them to others, quickly and randomly. Each participant should have a ball. Point out how this type of hurried and unpredictable activity is like stressful interactions. For example, there are missed signals (dropping the ball), negative responses (balls coming at you from out of nowhere) and stress reactions (rapid heartbeat). When there has been enough time for this, gather up the balls and ask participants what effect there might be on the child with all this random stressful activity. Point out how this constant stress can weaken or prevent brain circuitry from forming. While brains can continue to form connections into adulthood, it is much easier in childhood.*

We all want our children to grow up healthy and strong and prepared for adulthood, so now for the rest of the session, we're going to focus on some positive ways to cope with stress.

When giving this information, be sure to add that children can handle occasional inattention and stressed interactions. The important thing is that as a pattern, the father-child interactions are predictable and positive.

If budget allows, invite participants to keep one of the stress balls as a reminder for managing stress.

## Resources

The Harvard Centre for the Developing Child presents this information in short video clips ([www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)) and view *The Science of Neglect* (5 min) and *Three Core Concepts in Early Development* (three separate videos about 1.5 minutes each). Further resources to help become comfortable with this information are listed in Appendix 1.

## Materials You Will Need

- Flip chart
- Markers
- Tape
- A collection of 10 to 20 balls for indoor use, such as stress balls from a dollar store, three larger and the rest smaller.

# Beginning of Stress Shift: Relaxation Exercise



## Activity

Ask participants to sit or lie comfortably in a quiet area for a ten minute relaxation exercise.

Ask participants to focus on their breathing and then start to play the audio tape you have chosen.

When the relaxation exercise is over, check in with the group about how they are feeling and then introduce the next exercise.

If you want to turn out the lights, first ask if participants are comfortable with the lights out. To limit distractions, headphones for participants could help. If the relaxation script does not include music, we suggest adding calming music to accompany the script.

## Materials You Will Need

- Choose from a range of audio tapes or yoga stretch meditation tapes. See Appendix 4 for examples.
- DVD player



## **Stress Shift: Positive Coping & Parent-Child Modeling**

### **Activity**

With calming music continuing in the background, ask participants to think about how they could change the ways they commonly respond to stress and shift to more positive coping.

Encourage participants to name a positive coping skill. If they can't think of one, refer back to what they said makes them feel proud or happy as a dad. Point out how the stressors may become supports, for example, asking for help from parents even if at times it is a stressful relationship.

Encourage participants to think of how they could include their child, such as taking a child parent cooking class, child parent yoga, etc. This provides a great opportunity for role-modeling these coping skills. Record responses on flip chart. For example, ask for help from family members, breathe deeply, plan ahead, get exercise, etc.

Hand out a list of parent-child community programs available in your neighbourhood.

This is a winding down activity. Try to keep the relaxed tone that is in the room when you do this activity.

Research ahead of time what parent child programs are available in your community. If available in your community, include in the handout a phone number to call for information about programs. Point it out as you are distributing the handouts.

### **Materials You Will Need**

- Flip chart paper
- Markers
- Tape
- Calming music
- DVD player
- Handouts listing parent-child community programs

## Making a Commitment



### Activity

Ask participants to look over the flip chart list and choose two positive coping skills that they are committed to trying out over the next few weeks when they are feeling stressed. Encourage participants to choose one to do alone and the other as a parent-child activity.

Hand out two pieces of paper and two envelopes to each participant and ask them to record (draw or write down) the two ideas they have chosen. Invite participants to put one piece of paper in an envelope and give it to you to mail or email back in a few weeks. The other they keep as their own reminder. Additionally, give out the Commitment Form from Dad Central, and ask participants to complete and return it before leaving. Let participants know that someone from Dad Central will be contacting them to follow up. Point out that this is a way to evaluate the program; it is not evaluating the participants.

Be sure to honour your commitment. Keep a reminder to self to mail out the envelopes.

### Materials You Will Need

- Envelopes and small pieces of paper for each participant
- Pens
- Markers



## **Wrap Up & Evaluation**

### **Activity**

Give out evaluation forms. Thank the group for their participation and encourage them to start using their new skills. If budget allows, give out transit fare.

### **Materials You Will Need**

- Evaluation forms
- Pens
- Transit fare, if budget allows.

## Resources

### Articles

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2009)

**Working Paper#3: Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain.**

Centre on the Developing Child Harvard University

[http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports\\_and\\_working\\_papers/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports_and_working_papers/)

Wilkinson, D. L., Magora, A., Garcia, M., & Khurana, A. (2009)

**Fathering at the Margins of Society.**

Journal of Family Issues, 30(7), 945-967.

### Videos

Kulkarni, Chaya. (2012)

**How Stress Affects a Child's Brain Development.**

<http://tvoparents.tv.org/video/185490/how-stress-affects-childs-brain-development>

Maté Gabor: (2012)

**Dr. Gabor Mate: Parental Stress and It's Impact on Kids.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rof2UQfzUtY>

Post Institute. (2013)

**Trauma, Brain and Relationship: Helping Children Heal.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYyEEMIMMb0>

**Three Core Concepts in Early Development.**

Center on the Developing Child Harvard University

[http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/multimedia/videos/three\\_core\\_concepts/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/multimedia/videos/three_core_concepts/)

### Handout

Health Canada. (2008)

**It's Your Health: Mental Health - Coping with Stress.**

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/alt\\_formats/pacrb-dgapcr/pdf/iyh-vsv/life-vie/stress-eng.pdf](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/alt_formats/pacrb-dgapcr/pdf/iyh-vsv/life-vie/stress-eng.pdf)

**Why We Stressin': The Father-Child Stress Connection**  
is a workshop from the My Dad Matters toolkit and a publication of:



*Engaging Men Raising the Next Generation*

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