



Amazing Dads! Fatherhood Curriculum

This is the first gender-responsive, trauma-informed curriculum designed specifically for fathers. Fathers have different needs, face different challenges, and want different guidance with parenting than mothers do. The curriculum addresses the complex intersection of male socialization, childhood and adolescent trauma, and relational struggles that often create disconnection between fathers and their children as well as in their other relationships. The primary goal of this curriculum is to help participants create a vision of the fathers they want to be and to provide them with the awareness, tools, and confidence to achieve that vision.

Each of the eighteen, two-hour, co-facilitated sessions includes activities, exercises, and experiential opportunities enabling each father to connect with the content on a personal level. The program is wide-ranging and encompasses a variety of topics to help fathers develop increased self-awareness to enhance their relationships with their children and other family members. The material will stretch both participants and facilitators alike. The sessions are designed to take a deep and comprehensive look at the barriers impeding dads from being the best fathers they can be.

As a trauma-informed curriculum to build trust and group cohesiveness and create an atmosphere of open and honest interactions between fathers and facilitators, each session has:

- consistent openings and closings to foster safety among participating fathers and those facilitating the sessions.
- various techniques throughout the curriculum to help fathers better understand when they are being triggered, skills for regulating the impact of stress and developing resilience, and how to develop understanding in themselves and with others about the impact of past experiences on their ability to be safe and loving parents.
- small group activities, grounding exercises, and interactive lectures (where the dads lead the teaching of some of the most emotionally challenging material to help mitigate the impact of shame and defensiveness).

The curriculum speaks to all learning styles using kinesthetic, audio, and visual engagement using art, physical movement, and role plays. Fathers are given additional learning opportunities in the form of exercises to complete between sessions to put their learning Into Action. These exercises build upon the role plays and in-session practice that the fathers receive to help them translate the material directly into their own lives.

Topics covered in this program include:



- The impact of male socialization (The Man Rules) on a father's identity (a core theme that guides the context of the whole curriculum)
- Skill-building and practical tools fathers can use with, and teach to, their children
- Understanding trauma, the specific ways that men experience and respond to trauma, and its effects on fathers
- A comprehensive and unique look at relational skill development
- Developing emotional fluency particularly as relates to anger and shame
- Enhanced communication skills for healthy conflict resolution
- The influence of family of origin experiences on fathers
- Exploring the relationships with fathers/father-figure and mothers/mother-figure
- A candid exploration of Sex, Sexuality, and Intimacy and how to begin having healthy dialogue about these topics with their children
- Differentiating discipline from punishment, how punishment can turn into abuse, and identifying what healthy discipline looks like
- The effects of male socialization on the fathers' ability to create and maintain healthy relationships, offering them specific tools to help repair during times of disconnection
- Finding balance and the importance of self-care as part of being a healthy father
- Understanding and meeting the changing roles and expectations of men and fathers in the 21st century

The *Amazing Dads!* curriculum has been developed over the course of several years. Part of the process was identifying opportunities to pilot the curriculum through organizations and programs that serve fathers. The pilot process provided incredible feedback and allowed us to make enhancements to the curriculum based not only on feedback from the professionals facilitating the sessions, but also the participating fathers themselves (through feedback forms collected by the facilitators of the pilots). We worked with the following programs:

- Bridges Inc. Men's Residential Treatment Program - Pilot completed September 2018
- Catholic Charities of Thompson/Tioga County in conjunction with Ithaca Family Treatment Court - Pilot completed April 2019
- Helen Ross McNabb Center in Knoxville, TN - Pilot completed June 2018
- Terros Health in Mesa, AZ – Pilot completed March 2020

As part of the pilot process, we met with each facilitator (or group of facilitators) on a bi-weekly or monthly basis throughout their participation in the pilot. This allowed us to collect direct feedback on each session from the facilitators. Additionally, facilitators were given forms to complete with their feedback as well as forms for the fathers to complete after each session. The feedback obtained through the pilot process was invaluable and contributed significantly to our final version of the *Amazing Dads!* program.



Ways this curriculum differentiates itself from other parenting/fatherhood curricula:

Parenting curricula do not consistently address the prevalence of trauma in parents, nor do they highlight the specific needs of dads when it comes to understanding the impact trauma has on parenting. To our knowledge this is the *only* trauma-informed curriculum specifically for dads. Our curriculum has a session dedicated to dads and trauma and with a trauma-informed structure and approach infused throughout. There is an ongoing reference to trauma throughout the sessions thereby normalizing the idea of trauma as something that men can – and need to -- talk about. Furthermore, while some curricula look at the significant impact of gender conditioning on fathers and how they parent, that is the foundation of this curriculum with every session looking at the main topic through that context. Finally, we believe the breadth of topics this curriculum addresses are not the norm for fatherhood curricula based upon feedback we have received from our pilot sites, for instance, having two sessions dedicated to sex and sexuality. That feedback has also told us that the topics are very relevant and necessary for the curriculum’s overall efficacy. In addition to every session having grounding and breathing exercises, we have incorporated a “safety check” where we periodically check in with the fathers, particularly after more challenging topics. While this tool is helpful for the facilitators and the overall safety and regulation of the group, it is especially designed to help the fathers see how they are doing and learn the practice of self-regulation.

Audience:

This curriculum is for all dads, with children of all ages, especially those who have found themselves in child protective services or some other aspect of the child welfare system.

While the audience is all dads, significant interest is going to come from parenting programs, behavioral health treatment programs, addiction treatment programs, and other community-based programs that have groups with members/participants who are fathers.

Structure of each meeting:

Excluding the first meeting, as the first meeting is geared to orienting the dads to the program, each meeting follows the same basic structure (more details identified in meeting summaries in the next section):

- Consistent opening:
 - A brief summary of the previous meeting’s topic
 - Check-in
 - Grounding exercise, relaxation exercise (2)
 - Feelings and body check-in
- Multiple activities, discussions, lectures on the topic of the meeting:
 - Large group discussions
 - Small group discussions



- Lectures and interactive lectures
- Arts and crafts activities
- Kinesthetic activities getting the dads up and moving while interacting with one another
- Opportunities to provide feedback for each activity, discussion, etc.
- Check-out:
 - Opportunity for dads to share how the meeting topic relates to fatherhood from their personal perspectives
 - One more grounding/relaxation/meditation exercise
- Assignments and Close:
 - Review of the Into Action and Practical & Tactical exercises that the dads are asked to complete between meetings
 - Wrap-up of the meeting's topic
 - Reminder that perfection is not the goal, rather awareness and intentional decision-making are what the dads should strive for

Detailed Meeting Summaries:

The *Amazing Dads!* curriculum includes two chapters for facilitator education and guidance, prior to the actual session content. The first chapter focuses on the overall theory and research behind the material included in the *Amazing Dads!* program to help give facilitators an understanding of the foundations of the curriculum. The second chapter focuses on our overall philosophy for successful facilitation of the curriculum and general guidance for the facilitators to use the curriculum. Additionally, *Amazing Dads!* has a workbook that is designed for each dad to utilize throughout the program. It is meant to be “theirs” and something they can reference after completion of the program.

Meeting 1: Finding the Father Within

The first meeting is an introduction to what the dads can expect throughout their participation in the *Amazing Dads!* program. There is discussion of the different goals for the program as a whole, and then the dads have opportunities to explore their own goals for their time in the program as well as some important questions about what fatherhood means to them. This session is meant to “set the stage” for the rest of the program.

Meeting 2: The Man Rules

While all meetings in this program are important, *this* meeting is one that sets the stage for all of *Amazing Dads!* In this meeting, the dads learn about how the ways that boys are raised make a huge impact on how they see the world, how they see what is safe for them or not, and how they relate to others in their lives. They are introduced to the concept of “The Water” and then “The Man Rules.” The dads have opportunities to discuss how many of the “rules” are often pressed



upon them in harmful ways, and how those rules push boys and men away from healthy connections with others. The result is that many boys and men feel safer when they stick to the rules that are actually harmful to them. And that has a big impact on how the dads show up as fathers, whether they realize it or not.

Meeting 3: Toxic Water

This meeting continues on the theme of discussing the concept of The Water and highlighting many ways culture strongly influences how people understand the world around them. This is especially true when it comes to how people perceive others, specifically people who are different. It is important to explore these ideas for multiple reasons: for the dads to begin thinking about how their own culture fits into the larger system (or doesn't fit in), to get honest about the ideas, beliefs, and judgments they have internalized about other people and groups, to imagine ways they can use their own culture to create more equality and understanding among the people in their lives, and to consider how they can help their children see *their* own power in celebrating differences and recognizing the value of diversity.

Meeting 4: Dads and Trauma – Breaking the Cycle

Trauma is a topic that is being discussed more and more in the open, and with the increase in research and knowledge that has come over recent decades we are learning how important it is to understand what trauma is, how it shows up differently for different people (ex. men versus women), and how critical it is to make sure the dads get help if they have any history of trauma. This meeting is not meant to replace trauma-related treatment such as therapy or medication. It is important to understand that this is meant as an educational opportunity to explore what trauma is and to give the dads more insight into what trauma looks like for men and fathers.

As the dads go through this meeting, they are encouraged to recognize what comes up for them. The topic of this meeting can be triggering. Therefore, they dads are encouraged to check in with themselves as they learn the information and go through the activities. The dads are reminded that they are learning different skills and tools to be able to care for themselves in any given moment and encouraged to practice those skills.

Meeting 5: Mental Health, Addiction, and Trauma

This meeting continues on the theme of helping the dads connect their past histories and experiences to their current realities. In this meeting, the dads learn about the ways in which past challenging experiences still have the ability to impact them throughout their lives. It is important to keep in mind, though, that this is simply information and not something designed to increase their stress. When approaching this subject, the dads are encouraged to consider how to use this information to better understand how they can be aware of the past's influence on them now, as well as think about ways to seek support for anything they may struggle with, now or in the future.



Meeting 6: Feelings...Nothing More Than Feelings

Meeting six begins an in-depth discussion about how fathers experience, deal with, and understand their own emotions and how that translates to their parenting. The dads explore the concept of the “anger funnel” and discuss how the Man Rules often conspire to keep men and dads angry and emotionally disconnected. They are introduced to a new tool called Digging Deeper that is an opportunity for them to be more authentic in their relationships, especially with their children. The dads have the opportunity to look at mistakes they may have made with their children and how to approach those same interactions differently, with new tools of emotional awareness.

Meeting 7: Exploring Family Dynamics, Past and Present

In this meeting, dads are introduced to the Woman Rules, the other half of the Rules of Gender. While not everyone subscribes to the Rules of Gender, most people do, and it is important for men to understand what women have to live with and how *they* are expected to live. The meeting then encourages the dads to look at the impact their family of origin had on their lives, both growing up and currently as a man and a dad. The dads learn about the four main roles in families – hero, invisible child, scapegoat, and mascot – and begin to look at how the role(s) they played in their families growing up has followed them into adulthood and may be impacting how they show up as fathers.

Meeting 8: Father of Mine

The primary focus of this meeting is to have the dads explore their relationships with their own fathers or father-figures. Many dads do not recognize their fathers as imperfect men with their own problems, insecurities, pain, and even trauma. Regardless of whether they liked their fathers or even knew them, the dads are encouraged to consider how their fathers had profound impacts on their lives just as how the dads will impact their own children. The meeting’s goal is to offer some new perspectives to the dads on their own fathers’ lives and then communicate some of what they may have never shared with their fathers to help them in healing or simply celebrating their relationships.

Meeting 9: Mothers

The primary focus of this meeting is for the dads to explore their relationships with their mothers or mother-figures. Many of the dads do not recognize their mothers as imperfect women with their own problems, insecurities, pain, and even trauma. Regardless of whether they liked their mothers or even knew them, their mothers had profound impacts on their lives just their children’s mothers do with their own children. How the dads related to their mothers and how their mothers treated them is connected to how they relate to and treat women in their own lives. This meeting offers the dads some new perspectives on their mothers’ lives and an opportunity to communicate some of what they may have never shared with their mothers, in order to help them in healing or simply celebrating their relationships.



Meeting 10: Healthy Relationships are for Us Too!

The focus of this meeting is to look at the importance of relationships in the lives of men. It may seem obvious that relationships are critical to a father's healthy life, but our society still does not truly or adequately prepare men to be able to navigate relationships. In particular, the dads explore the importance of *repairing* as relates to helping deal with conflict that occurs with their children. The dads discuss actual scenarios from their lives and get support from other group members on how to show up differently with new tools – tools they should have been given all along, but weren't due to standard male socialization norms.

Meeting 11: Communication is Key

Relationships are nearly impossible without communication, but that fact doesn't mean that men and dads do it well. A lot of communication is driven by feelings, and dads rarely or never even realize it. This meeting provides guidance around the four basic styles of communication – passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and assertive. The dads have the opportunity to look at the benefits and costs of each communication style. Then, they practice one of the most important skills of communication: listening. Whether it is listening to their partners or their children, it is critical that this skill be developed as they seek to improve as fathers.

Meeting 12: Let's Talk About Sex

This is the first of two meetings dedicated to sex and sexuality. Given how much The Man Rules interweave masculinity, sex, and intimacy, it is vital to explore these concepts in-depth. The dads' first reaction may be: "What does this have to do with me being a father?" The response is, "More than you may think." This meeting begins with a very open and uncensored discussion about sex and sexuality – and the feelings connected to it that dads often don't discuss, especially not with other men and dads. The dads are then introduced to the concept of the "Sex Funnel" and how sex and intimacy frequently get confused to mean the same thing. The dads also learn how their lives are full of intimacy. Finally, the dads have an opportunity to reflect on everything they wish they had been told and taught about sex and sexuality as a child, knowing what they know now.

Meeting 13: Let's REALLY Talk About Sex

In this second meeting focused on sex and sexuality, the dads begin by having an open conversation about how they first learned about sex, most often as a child. Then there is a very important conversation about consent that should be part of every academic curriculum and taught to boys and girls alike. The meeting ends with the dads having the opportunity to start developing their very own "sex talk" that they want to have with their children. This is often the first time they have been given such an opportunity to consider what to say to their children, plan it out, and even have some authentic discussions with other dads in the group.



Meeting 14: Men's Health

In this meeting, the dads explore what it means to be healthy in a holistic way. Physical health can often be overlooked for, and by, men and dads. However, it is also not easy to fully consider all of the dimensions of health. That is why this meeting asks the dads to explore eight dimensions of wellness. At the end of the meeting, they have the opportunity to create their own comprehensive Wellness Action Plans so that they can intentionally give time and care to the various needs in their lives. Throughout this meeting, as in all meetings before, the dads are encouraged to remember that what they model for their children will influence them. If the dads are not willing to care for their own wellbeing, their children will most likely internalize that personal wellbeing is not important.

Meeting 15: Healthy Discipline

This meeting may be intense for some of the dads. We know that some people grew up in tough environments while others grew up in violent environments. There is a whole range of safety that boys grow up in. Some of the dads will have had the privilege of feeling safe and loved and valued their whole childhoods; others will have had experiences that would literally break some people; and everything in between. Since each dad had his own unique experiences, this meeting explores the difference between discipline and punishment to help make the differences clear and understandable. The dads have the opportunity to learn about different types of discipline, identify which one(s) they turn to most often, and which one(s) they *want* to turn to from a place of intention. The dads then take a very comprehensive look at abuse and violence in a way that dads often do not discuss or explore.

Meeting 16: The Art of Play

How much time have you spent thinking about the importance and benefits of play in your children's lives? This meeting explores the research showing the importance of play in the lives of children and adults. You have the opportunity to work through some questions about the most effective way to play with your kids. And then, you get a chance to play! How cool is that? Enjoy.

Play is something that is vital to building relationships with children, however it is not often considered as an intentional choice dads should make to engage with their kids. This meeting is designed to help the dads take the roles of "expert" and share with one another the ways in which they have fun and play with their children, while also learning about the documented benefits of play. The dads then explore some of the research showing the importance of play in the lives of children and adults. They are then asked to work through some questions about the most effective ways to play with their kids. The dads have an opportunity to identify the barriers they experience that prevent them from playing with their children as much as they would like (or at all). The point being that they get to acknowledge a lack of perfection on their part, which is



something the Man Rules oppose doing, but they can do so in a safe place without fear of being shamed. And then, they get their own opportunity to “play” as part of the group.

Meeting 17: A Balancing Act

Balance can be a difficult thing to achieve, yet something that many dads are told they need to strive for. They might feel stressed by their jobs, parenting responsibilities, and everything else they have to juggle. This meeting offers the opportunity to explore what healthy balance looks like, to understand that it can look different at different times, and to admit that sometimes balance might not even be possible – and that is okay. At the end of this meeting, the dads have the opportunity to make sense of everything they have been learning in the *Amazing Dads!* program in a way that works and makes sense for each of them. We identify that the program may have been a bit overwhelming to the dads, to have all of these different ideas and skills presented to them in a relatively short period of time. This meeting is their opportunity to not only make it manageable, but also find an effective way to really implement the information into their lives so that it is truly time well spent.

Meeting 18: A Vision of Fatherhood

This may or may not be the dads’ last meeting as part of the *Amazing Dads!* curriculum, depending on whether the curriculum is run as a closed or open group. However, this meeting is a powerful point in their journey where they get to summarize the importance and breadth of the work they have done. The dads get a chance to share their “final project” with the group – the Coat of Arms project – which is meant to be a summary of the fathers they want to be. Lastly, because men and dads are not always the best at saying goodbye or acknowledging their feelings for someone, they are encouraged to participate in an activity that honors the connections they made with the other amazing dads in their group in a special way.

Comparable Books/Curricula:

24/7 Dad

Focus on Fathering

The Nurturing Fathers Program

Quenching the Father Thirst: Developing a Dad

Real Life Heroes

There are numerous fatherhood curricula, but as previously mentioned, *Amazing Dads!* is unique in this space. *Amazing Dads!* uses the common tendencies of male socialization in our society to help explain each of the topics discussed. Other curricula mention aspects of male socialization and its impact, but *Amazing Dads!* recognizes the foundational aspects of male socialization on how fathers parent their children. Additionally, *Amazing Dads!* does this through a trauma-informed approach that brings a strong component of safety into the group setting while it delves deeply into a wide array of topics that are critical to healthy fathering – topics that fathers simply do not tend to talk about with people in their lives.



About the authors:

Dan Griffin, MA - Dan's work and life are dedicated to exploring and redefining what it means to be a man in the 21st century. Dan has almost three decades of experience and is an international speaker and trainer helping programs develop gender-responsive services for men. Dan is the author of *A Man's Way Through Relationships*, the first trauma-informed book dedicated to helping men create healthy relationships while navigating the impact of male socialization or what he calls, The Man Rules. Dan is also the author of *A Man's Way through the Twelve Steps*, and co-author of *Helping Men Recover*, the first comprehensive gender-responsive and trauma-informed curriculum for addiction and mental health professionals. Dan is co-author of the first trauma-informed father's curriculum, *Amazing Dads!* with Harrison Crawford. Dan is co-author of *Healing Men's Pain*, with Jonathan DeCarlo, a curriculum focused on men's experience with trauma. Dan is the co-author of the forthcoming book, *What Men Would Tell You if They Weren't Too Busy Watching TV*, written with Dr. Allen Berger, written specifically to women to help them better understand the inner lives of men to enhance their relationships and connections with the men in their lives. Dan is also the author of a forthcoming book looking at men's experience identifying and healing from trauma. Dan earned a Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Kansas where his graduate work was the first qualitative study centered on the social construction of masculinity in the culture of Alcoholics Anonymous. Dan grew up in the DC area and lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Nancy, and his daughter, Grace, and has been in long-term recovery from addiction since 1994.

Harrison Crawford, LPC LISAC - Harrison has worked in the field of mental health since 2010 and is a Licensed Professional Counselor with additional independent licensure focused on substance use disorders. He spent his first years in the field providing individual and family therapy, behavior modification, developing functional behavior assessments, and providing clinical supervision to multiple specialty residential programs in Arizona. Harrison then moved to a community health agency where he provided group and individual therapy to parents with diagnosed substance use disorders who were also involved in the child welfare system. Harrison developed his passion for working with fathers through this work as he observed many of the systemic barriers that men and fathers encounter in the mental health and child welfare systems. This passion was inspired by his encounter with Dan Griffin and Dan's work on gender-responsive treatment and father-focused program development. Harrison has been working with Dan and Griffin Recovery Enterprises ever since. Harrison's hope is to assist fathers through bringing awareness to the specific needs of fathers who are involved in mental health services and helping systems implement gender-responsive and trauma-informed programming.

Harrison has lived in Arizona since 1992 and attended the University of Arizona for his undergraduate degree in psychology with a minor in sociology. Harrison then completed his



graduate work at Argosy University in Phoenix, earning Master's degrees in Mental Health Counseling and Sport-Exercise Psychology. Harrison lives in Gilbert, Arizona with his wife, Jenna, and two children, Grayson and Kinsley.