

# The Greatest Challenges to being a Father: Responses from the 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit

## Background

The annual Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit sponsored by the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative (MFI) brings together the Milwaukee community to generate support for fathers, to provide information and resources for fathers and families, and to address specific issues of fatherhood in the community (e.g., child support debt reduction, driver's license recovery, men's health, and employment).

When completing a registration form for the 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit, attendees were asked to describe their greatest challenges to being a father. A total of 403 of the 700 Summit attendees (57.6%) responded to this question. Most notably, the ability to act as provider, being able to have contact with and develop meaningful relationships with their children, and being able to provide structure and guidance to their children were the most frequently cited as the greatest challenges for being a father.

## Fathers Role as Providers

Many fathers (n=83) reported that their greatest challenge to being a father was the financial responsibility involved with providing for their children. For example:

*"My greatest challenge being a father is not having enough money to give the things that they need."*

*"Not to have the money to give the things my son wants. I know he doesn't need everything, but just telling him I don't have the money hurts me."*

*"I would say the greatest challenge of being a father is being able to support them."*

Approximately two-thirds of the attendees (66%) reported that they were unemployed at the time of registering for the summit. Some fathers (n=48) indicated that simply finding stable employment was their biggest challenge to being a father. For example:

*"I think my greatest challenge is providing. I've been searching for a job for quite some time now. I would like to be in my own house paying bills and being a provider. I feel bad not being able to get them the things they need."*

*"My greatest challenge of being a father is that I cannot provide for my children financially because I am unable to find employment with my background."*

*"Finding suitable employment at my age, to provide for my five girls."*

*"My greatest challenge is having stable employment to provide for my child."*

## Fathers Building Meaningful Relationships with their Children

Another challenge noted by many of the fathers who attended the Summit (n=82) was being able to be a part of their children's lives. Fathers reported that striving to have a role in their children's lives and maintain a relationship with them, not having the time to parent because of the demands of work or school, and the inability to have contact with their children due to living arrangements or custody issues were their greatest challenges. For example:

*"Being there for my child when she needs me [has been a challenge]."*

*"Getting back in touch with my son and getting to know him better."*

*“Balancing work and school and making time to be active with my daughters’ activities.”*

*“The greatest challenge is being there for my daughter the way I want because she stays in Chicago.”*

### **Fathers Guiding and Supporting their Children**

Many fathers who attended the Summit (n=72) reported that their biggest challenge to being a father was trying to provide guidance in their children’s lives, either by serving as a role model themselves or by expressing the importance of morals and values, education, or spirituality to their children. For example:

*“Setting an example for him and putting myself in the position to do so.”*

*“Trying to raise my two sons to be respectful, responsible, and productive men without them being influenced by negative people and images that they see in society.”*

*“Teaching my kids the importance of staying focused in life and school.”*

*“Being a great father even when you didn’t have the greatest examples and overcoming that obstacle in your life so it can overflow into the lives of your children and to their children.”*

### **Conclusion**

A large number of fathers (403 of 700, or 57.6%) who attended the 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit provided information on their greatest challenge as a father. Overall, fathers reported that their greatest challenges to fathering were the ability to act as provider, being able to have contact with and develop meaningful relationships with their children, and being able to provide structure and guidance to their children.

The greatest challenges cited by fathers who attended the Summit reflect the literature on fathers’ view of their key roles as being: (1) Participator/Problem-Solver; (2) Playmate; (3) Principled Guide; (4) Provider, and; (5) Preparer.<sup>1</sup> In other words, fathers see their roles as actively involved in parenting, and providing moral direction, financial support, emotional support, and equipping their children with skills to face life challenges.

The greatest challenges reported by fathers who attended the Summit suggest that some fathers may perceive themselves as not being able to completely fulfill all aspects of their role as a father. Fathers indicated that both individual and system-related factors influenced their ability to parent (for example, being able to find stable employment, spending quality time with their children and managing other life demands, not living in the same household as their children, etc.).

This data provides insights into some of the challenges facing fathers who attended the 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit. The Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative can use this information to enhance their understanding of challenges fathers face. In addition, the information may support the MFI’s ongoing and expanding efforts to ensure that father have resources and support to work towards strengthening their ability to act as providers, build strong relationships with their children, and provide guidance and direction to their children.

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<sup>1</sup> Fogarty, K. and E.D. Garret (2009). The Common Role of Fathers: The Five Ps. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Services Extension. *Electronic Data Information Source*. doi: FCS2140.