



Involved Dads

An Interview with Jeff Kirk, Colorado PTA

PTA: Why did you start a men's program? What was the need you saw that drove you to start planning a program?

Kirk: When I first took a day off to spend it with my daughter's class, I found out that it was incredibly rare. The children welcomed me with open arms as dads just didn't do that (come to the classroom). My first thought was that dads were missing out on a lot of fun. So I started talking to some dads I knew, and they thought I was crazy. So I needed a different approach to get them interested. I did some research and found out that dads have a tremendous impact on kid's lives now and into adulthood, especially with daughters. As a dad, I feared teenage pregnancy. I found out that simply by being involved, you drastically reduce the chance of it happening. I went to the National PTA male engagement conference to learn more, and see what other people were doing. At that conference I decided I needed to do more. I wanted dads to know what impact they had on their kid's lives, so they could choose to make it a positive one. In talking with friends, I decided the best way to do that was to start our own program to educate dads, and reduce the barriers for them. A lot of dads are uncomfortable in schools, so I had to make it easier and less intimidating.

PTA: What were the steps you took to get organized?

Kirk: I talked to lots of people I knew to get ideas and run my ideas past them. I also researched what it takes to start and run a non-profit. Being the PTA president at my daughter's school, I had some experience, which helped. Then I decided what perspectives I wanted covered by the board to make sure we considered various viewpoints. I then thought about who I knew that would cover those perspectives, and pitched the idea to them. Everyone I talked to loved the idea. Once I had the different viewpoints covered, we incorporated, created bylaws and decided who was going to do what. Then we partnered with Jefferson County PTA. They loved what we are doing and asked me to come speak at some events.

PTA: How did you sell your idea to other men and how did you start?

Kirk: We started this at my daughter's school. This is where the man cards and the challenge coin came in really handy. The man card is a great ice breaker; it shows that you can be macho and still be involved in your kids' education. Some men think school is for the moms only. I would respond by showing them my man card. The challenge coin follows the military tradition of earning it. These cannot be purchased; you have to earn them by being involved in the school. This is a symbol of the commitment that the dad has made to their kids. It also serves as a reminder to the dad to make time for the kids when life may be getting in the way. These are coveted by the dads. We also make it fun, as dads love to have a good time.

PTA: What obstacles did you run into?

Kirk: We have run into a couple of challenges. Getting dads to talk about being a better dad is really hard for most, as it means they are currently not the best they can be. So instead of talking about it from that angle, we talk about getting together with other dads and kids. We then talk about stuff or do activities that help them bond.

Getting the word to the dads is hard. A lot of dads don't read stuff that comes home in kids Friday folders, and they don't attend PTA meetings, conferences or training. So we talk to a lot of moms, who are looking for ways to get the dads into the school. We have also found that if the kids' get excited about an event, that is far more powerful than a flyer or email going home to dads. We are still pretty new and working our way through some obstacles. One obstacle we are trying to resolve now is how do we grow to meet the demand, but still keep the quality of our programs? Fundraising is always a challenge.

PTA: What worked and what didn't work?

Kirk: This is always a learning process. What works in one school doesn't work in another school. However, some things seem universal – you need to make it easy for the dads to get involved. Giving the dads an ice breaker, a way to give each other grief over being involved or not being involved goes a long way. Dads don't just walk up to one another and ask each other about their kid's school. But they can work the man card or the coin into conversation confidently and easily. Every dad wants to be involved; a lot just aren't sure how to do it.

PTA: What is the work of Involve Dads?

Kirk: We meet with schools that are looking to get more dads involved and talk with them. The idea is to customize something for them. Maybe they want an All Pro Dad program, but don't have anyone to start it. We could start it, then find a dad to transition the program to. We have met with a couple of schools that simply want advice on what they are doing wrong. We also do Dad to Kid Nights where the dads and kids build model kits. Soon we will be doing some pinewood derby races at school. We want to involve daughters, as well as sons.

We are pretty new and we customize events to whatever the school needs, and right now we do it for free in return for honest feedback from the school PTA and administration.

PTA: How can others reach you if they want to know more?

Kirk: Our website is www.involvedad.com.