

# **“Breaking Down the Barriers” Participant Feedback**

## **The 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit**

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**Prepared for:**



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## **"Breaking Down the Barriers" Background**

"Breaking Down the Barriers" was a supplemental event at the close of the 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit. The session aimed to bring mothers and fathers together to discuss strategies to help promote healthy co-parenting. The session included an interactive panel discussion which featured legal professionals, legislators, service providers, and fathers. Summit participants were encouraged to voice questions and share their own personal stories, and panel members offered their expertise and insights on the topics raised. The event was free and open to the public, and individuals were encouraged to attend with their spouses or the children's other parent.

In order to gain a better understanding of the strengths of the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session as well as to get suggestions for improvement, the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative (MFI) contracted with the Planning Council to review registration information and to conduct key informant interviews. The interviewees consisted of fathers who attended the session and professionals who participated in the two panels. The interviews were designed to assist the MFI in learning how people involved with the session experienced it; if any collaborations came out of the session; if participants would recommend this kind of a session for future summits; if participants' relationships with their children or their children's other parents were impacted; and other suggestions about how the MFI could promote healthy co-parenting (see Appendices A and B for lists of questions).

## **Registration Information**

Attendees were asked to complete a brief registration form upon entering the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session. The registration form asked for contact information, demographic information such as gender, age and ethnicity, whether or not the registrant had participated in other summit events, and whether or not the attendee was attending alone or with his/her spouse (see Appendix C). A total of 103 individuals filled out a registration form at the session. The majority of people who filled out a form (88%, or 88 of 101) stated that they attended other events at the 2009 summit. Most session attendees were African American men over the age of 30. Though most participants who registered were males, almost half of those who registered said that they attended the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session with their spouse.<sup>1</sup> See Table 1 for more detailed information on the attendee registration.

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<sup>1</sup> This finding is difficult to interpret. It is possible that the registration information may not be representative of all session attendees, with more women attending than was reflected in the data. It is also possible that the wording of the question about spouse attendance was confusing, and that, as documented in the registration data, the vast majority of attendees were men. The latter possibility is supported by interview data, as the panelists interviewed reported that most attendees were male and that very few women were present.

**Table 1: Demographic Information for all 2009 "Breaking Down the Barriers" Registrants**

<b>Age</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Under 21	5	5.0%
21 to 30	15	15.0%
31 to 40	43	43.0%
Over 40	37	37.0%
<b>Total</b>	100	100.0%
<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	90	90.9%
Female	9	9.1%
<b>Total</b>	99	100.0%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
African American	96	94.1%
Caucasian	1	1.0%
Latino/Hispanic	2	2.0%
Other	3	2.9%
<b>Total</b>	102	100.0%
<b>Attended with Spouse</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	45	46.9%
No	51	53.1%
<b>Total</b>	96	100.0%

Note: Total N=103 registrants. Total numbers vary for each question due to missing data.

Nearly all registrants (98%, or 98 of 100) provided ZIP Codes that were within Milwaukee County, with over half indicating that they resided in the following ZIP Codes: 53209 (n=18), 53206 (n=13), 53212 (n=11), 53210 (n=9), and 53218 (n=9).

### Telephone Interview Methodology

The Planning Council selected potential attendees to be interviewed by selecting session participants who included an email address and phone number on their registration form (while excluding those who had already been recruited for participation in a focus group regarding the 2009 summit).<sup>2</sup> Of the attendees who met these criteria, individuals representing different ZIP codes and genders were selected to be contacted, with a goal of interviewing five attendees. The first wave of attendees recruited (N=11) were contacted via email. However, this was found

<sup>2</sup> Of the 103 individuals who registered for the session, 31 had listed both phone numbers and email addresses. Of the 31, six had previously been contacted for focus group participation and therefore were excluded from recruitment.

to be an unsuccessful recruitment strategy, as no responses were received. As a result, follow-up phone calls were made to this wave of potential interviewees and the second wave recruited (N=5) were approached directly through phone calls. Ultimately, a total of 16 individuals were contacted to achieve the goal of five interviews conducted. All of the attendees interviewed were male, despite efforts to recruit several women attendees.

The MFI staff provided the Planning Council with contact information for all twelve panelists who presented at the "Breaking Down Barriers" session, with a goal of interviewing five panelists. The Planning Council selected panelists from diverse backgrounds to be recruited (e.g. legal and medical professionals, service providers, legislators, and fathers). The first wave of panelists recruited (N=5) was contacted via email. However, this strategy met with only limited success. As a result, follow-up phone calls were made to this wave of potential interviewees and the second wave recruited (N=6) received both an email invitation and a follow-up phone call. A total of 11 panelists were contacted to achieve the goal of five interviews conducted. The five panelists ultimately interviewed consisted of three service providers, a medical professional, and a father.

Phone interviews with both panelists and attendees took place roughly six months after the 2009 Fatherhood Summit. The interviews were intentionally held at this later date in order to explore any collaborations developed and any ways in which attendees may have incorporated the lessons of the session into their daily lives and relationships. Each interview took between 10 and 20 minutes using open-ended questions to explore: 1) how both panelists and attendees experienced the session; 2) suggestions for improving the session; 3) if attendees had been able to apply what they learned at the session to their daily lives; 4) whether any collaborations came out of the session; and 5) what more the MFI could do to support co-parenting. Detailed notes from each of the phone interviews were reviewed using a systematic data reduction and coding process. Key themes were identified and manually coded.

## **Limitations**

The viewpoints described in this report are limited to the thoughts and opinions of a limited number of interviewees (N=10) selected through a variety of criteria, including having a phone number and an email address. As a result, the findings are not presented as representative of all "Breaking Down the Barriers" panelists or attendees. Nonetheless, the interviews were useful in gathering deeper insights and perspectives on topics from people who had direct experience of the session.

## **Results from Interviews with Attendees**

### **How Attendees Experienced the Session**

Overall, the attendees who were interviewed (N=5)<sup>3</sup> reported that they enjoyed the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session. Attendees generally liked the way the session brought different people together and its focus on interpersonal relationships, both between the two parents and between the parents and the children. The session's focus on mothers and fathers working as a team for the betterment of their children was mentioned as a useful aspect of the session. Furthermore, attendees found the session to be informative and praised the diversity of the panel. Most noted that they were able to learn from listening to each other's experiences as well

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<sup>3</sup> Of the five attendees who were interviewed, four attended the entire session, and one attended just the first half of the session.

as from the expertise of panelists. One attendee appreciated that the session gave fathers a voice. When asked if they would attend more sessions similar to "Breaking Down the Barriers" in the future, all of the attendees who were interviewed indicated that they would if provided an opportunity to do so.

### Applying what was Learned

In addition to enjoying the session and finding it informative, most of the attendees who were interviewed shared that they were able to apply what they learned in the session to their relationship with their children's mother. While one attendee mentioned that he was able to resolve an issue with his child's other parent, allowing him to see his daughter, most attendees talked about applying what they learned in broad terms. Examples included: gaining a better understanding of the importance of communication and how to communicate with the other parent; the importance of mutual respect between the parents; the importance of acting as a role model even when not around your children; and the need to stop blaming the other parent.

When asked to reflect on whether the session impacted their relationships with their children, most attendees who were interviewed indicated that their experience at "Breaking Down the Barriers" has had little direct impact on their relationships with their children. Most attendees who were interviewed felt they already had strong relationships with their children, and therefore were not expecting the session to help improve those relationships. However, as noted above, one attendee reported that he was able to apply what he learned from the session to be able to see his daughter.

### Attendees' Recommendations for Future Sessions

Attendees who were interviewed generally found the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session to be informative and useful. When asked to provide suggestions on how to improve future sessions, several attendees felt there was nothing to improve upon and that the session was "perfect." However, some interviewees offered suggestions they felt would make the session more useful. Suggestions included:

- Structure the session in such a way as to facilitate more one-on-one interaction between the fathers and the panelists.
- Have the session broken into two parts and host the session over two days. The first day could be an information based session on how to get along and work together with the other parent. The second day could be a practical application of the information learned on the first day—the fathers could bring their significant others in to work on the relationship and get a dialogue going.
- Offer classes with more regularity (instead of a once a year session). This could foster relationships between fathers who are in the classes together, allowing them to get to know each other better and open up more.

One interviewee noted that while the information provided in the session was useful, the way the information was presented required attendees to sit for a long period of time.

## Recommendations from Attendees to Support Co-Parenting

Interviewees were asked what else the MFI could do to support co-parenting besides hosting a session like "Breaking Down the Barriers." Attendees' recommendations for the MFI fell into two general categories: 1) facilitating family-based events and activities that emphasize co-parenting and 2) providing more information on resources available to fathers. Attendees who were interviewed suggested activities that encourage teamwork between parents, or sessions that could help parents resolve their problems, possibly with the help of a mediator. One attendee suggested the creation of a mentoring program, where fathers are *showing* others how to parent successfully. Two attendees explicitly recognized the importance of the role of women in co-parenting and recommended that the MFI increase their efforts to engage women in these types of events. Several attendees also suggested that the MFI host a picnic as a way to bring people together. This could serve as an event for parents and children to spend family time together and could be augmented with seminars and workshops as well.

Attendees also recommended that the MFI raise awareness about the resources available to fathers in the city. Coordinating more with other programs was one suggestion as to how the MFI could achieve this. One attendee made a more system-related suggestion to support men in their role as fathers. Specifically, he mentioned that resources and supplements for fathers similar to the ones available to mothers are needed and would be helpful.

## **Results from Interviews with Panelists**

### Involvement in the Session

Panelists who were interviewed (N=5) represented the medical and service provider sectors. They became involved in the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session through various ways. Some cited a previous relationship with Terence Ray (MFI Program Director) having either done volunteer work for him in the past or participated in previous sessions. Other panelists mentioned that they were involved in other aspects of the summit besides the panel discussion (one as a presenter and one in a breakout session).

### Experience of the Session

In general, the panelists who were interviewed were impressed by the number of fathers who attended the session and who were curious about the topic. Overall, interviewees praised the diversity of the panel and the skills of the moderator. Several panelists described the diversity of the panel as a definite strength of the session as the different experiences and expertise of the panelists provided varying perspectives on the topic. Furthermore, the panelists who were interviewed perceived the session to be well run and appreciated the way the moderator was able to allow men to speak their minds, but also prevent the session from getting overly off course with personal stories. One panelist appreciated that the session also gave men an opportunity to "vent" about their personal situations.

Although one panelist viewed the opportunity to "vent" as a strength of the session, another panelist disagreed, stating that the session was not the appropriate forum for "venting." Furthermore, despite the strengths of a highly qualified and diverse panel, several panelists felt there were too many panelists involved. For example, interviewees noted that the session had to be broken into two parts because of the large number of panelists. In addition, it was also

mentioned by several panelists that the session often veered off topic, and that the panelists did not have a shared goal of what they wanted the session to convey. One panelist attributed this to the diversity of viewpoints on the panel. Another panelist felt that the session was essentially "preaching to the choir" as the audience was comprised almost entirely of fathers. The session was designed to emphasize how mothers can help fathers break down the "co-parenting barriers," but the lack of mothers in attendance was viewed as preventing the session from accomplishing one of its main goals. One of the panelists was concerned that because mothers did not attend, few were able to gain insight from the session or provide their unique perspectives on the issues discussed.

### Perception of how the Session was Received

Overall, the panelists perceived the attendees as having mixed feelings about the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session. Most panelists acknowledged that attendees seemed to have wanted a space where they could "vent." Although the panelists who were interviewed thought many attendees came anticipating a session where they could talk about their personal situations and voice their concerns, the panelists themselves saw the session more as providing an opportunity to offer a variety of resources and responses to attendees' questions.

In this regard, several of the panelists perceived the diversity of the panel and the different points of view among the panelists as beneficial in that it provided different information and resources for those in attendance. One interviewee noted the importance of having State Senator Lena Taylor on the panel because she could provide legal information to the attendees and explain why certain things were happening to them and what they could do to fix them. One panelist also felt the discussion about controlling anger and resentment and the session's emphasis on the importance of having both parents involved in the child's life was particularly useful to attendees.

### Collaborations or Activities that Came out of the Session

In general, panelists who were interviewed reported that collaborations or activities had, in fact, come out of the session. Examples noted by the panelists included: the creation of a Facebook page to share information about issues like child support and driver's license recovery, utilizing local media to inform the public about specific topics such as driver's license recovery, and collaborating with St. Vincent's Family Resource Center by having them host their first fatherhood membership meeting, sharing information, and learning about fatherhood programs at St. Vincent's.

Two panelists indicated that they personally had collaborated with others or made connections as a result of the session, but were unaware of any general or broad-based collaboration or activities coming out of the session. For instance, one of the panelists who was interviewed noted that an attendee referred her child to the panelist for services. Another panelist discussed working with a co-panelist to address his specific personal situation. One interviewee hypothesized that any lack of large scale collaboration could be attributed to the fact that the session was scheduled as the last event on Saturday. Because of this, there was very little time to network and make connections as most people simply left after the session was over.

### Panelists' Recommendations for Future Sessions

Almost all of the panelists who were interviewed recommended that a session similar to "Breaking Down the Barriers" (either in structure or in content) be included in future summits. One panelist liked the panel format, but was not sure if he would recommend the same topic in the future. Instead he suggested that the MFI focus more on the legal aspect of fatherhood issues and the legislative battle to change custody laws.

The panelists indicated that future sessions would be more useful to attendees if they had more focused topics and just one smaller panel, as opposed to two different panels. This would give attendees more one-on-one feedback from experts and more time to ask questions as well. For example, some interviewee suggestions included:

- Use a more focused title that clearly conveys the theme of the session (e.g. changing the title back to its original title "Baby Mama Drama" was suggested). According to one panelist, "Breaking Down the Barriers" as a title is vague and does not convey the idea that the purpose of the session is to address co-parenting and relationships.
- Choose a specific theme and stick to it for the duration of the session. Provide in-depth information on one or two important topics or issues, and try to avoid providing superficial information on many different issues.
- Have moderated break out sessions organized by specific topics where men can discuss their personal situations and frustrations, and then come up with solutions for their problems.
- Have smaller panels done in different sessions with smaller groups.

### Recommendations from Panelists to Support Co-Parenting<sup>4</sup>

When asked what else the MFI could do to support co-parenting besides hosting a session like "Breaking Down the Barriers," nearly all panelists who were interviewed recommended that the MFI facilitate collaborative workshops that bring men and women together. It was suggested that the MFI accomplish this by coordinating with sisterhood groups to plan and execute such workshops. An emphasis was placed on the need to enhance cooperation and coordination between men and women. General suggestions for achieving this included:

- Create free workshops led by counselors where mothers and fathers who are having problems can go to work on their relationship and work through problems.
- Organize targeted workshops using the Nurturing Parenting Program curriculum for mothers and fathers who are going through a separation or divorce in order to facilitate co-parenting.

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<sup>4</sup> When asked for recommendations on how the MFI could further support co-parenting, some interviewees offered general recommendations for the MFI not related to supporting co-parenting. These suggestions included:

- Refer clients to direct services more often or provide more direct services to clients.
- Focus on the legislative angle of fatherhood issues more. This could be accomplished by sending more people out to Madison to aid in the legislative fight.
- Allow fathers to access the driver's license recovery and child support resources at the MFI Summit without requiring them to attend a certain number of workshops.

### **Comparisons of Panelist and Attendee Experiences**

Overall, both attendees and panelists recommended that the MFI host sessions similar to "Breaking Down the Barriers" in the future. Both groups felt that the session was helpful in that it was very informative and provided access to a variety of different professionals who could help attendees. However, the need for more one-on-one interaction between panelists and attendees was mentioned by at least one person in each group. Also, both groups recommended that the MFI make efforts to involve more women in future sessions focusing on this theme and in future activities.

The attendees and panelists who were interviewed offered somewhat differing recommendations for the MFI with regards to how they could improve the session and what activities they could do to further support co-parenting. The panelists recommended fewer panelists, and more focused topics, whereas attendees did not seem concerned about the size of the panel or the diversity of topics. Recommendations from the attendees focused more on lengthening the session by making it into a two day session or even a class that meets throughout the year.

There was also a difference between the way attendees who were interviewed experienced the session themselves and the way panelists who were interviewed perceived attendees' experiences. The panelists generally viewed the attendees as having mixed feelings about the session, and thought that the session was not what attendees had anticipated. Several panelists who were interviewed thought attendees were expecting a more interactive forum in which they could discuss their own situations and concerns. However, the responses of attendees interviewed do not reflect these perceptions. In general, the attendees had a positive perception of the session, and none mentioned that they felt unable to share their concerns and personal situations. Although attendee responses do not support the panelists' perceptions of their experience, it is notable that most of the recommendations offered by attendees involved fostering interpersonal relationships, either through more regular classes, the implementation of a mentor program, or by providing an opportunity to have a dialogue with their children's mothers. These recommendations suggest that more interactive sessions could be useful to fathers.

Finally, attendees and panelists interviewed differed somewhat in their responses to the final question about the other ways in which the MFI could support mothers and fathers working together to parent their children. Both groups mentioned including more women, raising awareness of existing resources, and facilitating workshops. Attendees also emphasized the desire to see these events in an informal interactive social setting. Attendees were interested in social gatherings such as picnics that could be used to bring people together, with workshops and team building activities being secondary to the social aspect of the event. Panelists who were interviewed focused their suggestions more on the technical and practical aspects of possible workshops, rather than on the importance of the interaction and sharing among fathers and families going through similar experiences.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit included a supplemental event, "Breaking Down the Barriers," designed to focus on the strategies to help support healthy co-parenting. Key informant interviews were conducted with a small sample of fathers who attended the session (N=5) and with a subset of the panelists who presented at the session (N=5). Recruitment of interviewees required several rounds of invitations, with phone recruitment being substantially

more effective than recruitment through email contact. The findings of the report are limited by the small number of interviewees, and may not be representative of all session participants. However, the issues and themes identified may provide some insight into the experiences of some session attendees and panelists.

Overall, attendees and panelists who were interviewed had positive feedback regarding the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session. The attendees, in particular, were enthusiastic about the session, finding it to be both informative and useful. Attendees appreciated the opportunity to learn from other fathers, as well as from the panelists. Those who were interviewed described several "lessons learned" from the session, including the importance of communication and mutual respect between parents and the need to avoid blaming the other parent.

Panelists who were interviewed were impressed by the number of attendees and valued the diversity of experiences and expertise represented on the panel. However, panelists were somewhat mixed in their overall assessment of the session. For example, the diversity of viewpoints on the panel was seen as a strength, but also as a weakness in that there may have been too many panelists, a lack of cohesion, and an absence of a shared goal for the session. Nonetheless, panelists described a number of collaborations or activities that they attributed to the "Breaking Down the Barriers" session (e.g., creation of a Facebook page to share information about issues such as child support and driver's license recovery).

Interestingly, the panelists were concerned that the session may not have been well received by attendees, which contrasted with the enthusiastic support expressed by the attendees who were interviewed. These differing perceptions may have been related to panelists' expectations of the session. Specifically, panelists viewed the session as an opportunity to offer resources and answer attendees' questions, while at the session itself a fair bit of time ended up being devoted to attendees sharing their personal situations. Alternatively, panelists may have been accurate in their perceptions; that is, since only a small number of attendees were interviewed, other attendees may have been less than satisfied with the session than those interviewed.

Both attendees and panelists indicated that it would be useful for the MFI to host sessions similar to "Breaking Down the Barriers" in the future, and suggestions were provided as to how to strengthen the session and promote co-parenting in general. Some of these suggestions included having the MFI host a family-focused picnic, providing year long classes, and facilitating workshops for mothers and fathers to work together. Overall, there was a sense that engaging more mothers in the effort was a key element to successfully moving the issue of co-parenting forward. Incorporating suggestions from panelists and attendees into next year's summit and other events hosted by the MFI could engage both attendees and future panelists and create sessions that are even more helpful to Milwaukee fathers in the long run.



## Appendix A

### List of Phone Interview Questions for Attendees

1. How much of the “Breaking Down the Barriers” session were you able to attend?
  - a. If you didn’t attend the full session, why was that?
2. What did you find most useful about the session?
3. What would have helped make it more useful?
4. Please describe anything from the session that you were able to apply to your relationship with your children’s other parent.
  - a. How has this impacted your relationship with your children?
5. Would you attend this kind of a session if it were offered at a future Fatherhood Summit?
  - a. If so, what would you hope to gain from another session?
  - b. If not, why not?
6. Name one thing that you think the MFI could do, besides hosting a session like this one, to support mothers and fathers working together to parent their children.



## Appendix B

### List of Phone Interview Questions for Panelists

1. Tell us briefly about your involvement with the “Breaking Down the Barriers” session.
2. Tell us about your experience of the session.
  - a. What went well?
  - b. What didn’t go as well?
3. How do you think attendees experienced the session?
  - a. What about the session do you think was beneficial or useful for them?
  - b. What could have been done to help make the session more beneficial?
4. To your knowledge, have there been any activities or collaborations that came out of the session?
  - a. If yes, please describe.
  - b. If no, why do you think that didn’t happen?
5. Would you recommend doing this kind of a session at future Fatherhood Summits?
  - a. If so, what suggestions would you have for the next round on this topic?
  - b. If no, why not?
6. Name one thing that you think the MFI could do, besides hosting a session like this one, to support mothers and fathers working together to parent their children.



