

## Overview of Men Who Attend CCE Parenting Programs and Discussion of How to Engage More Men in Future Parenting Programs

By Eliza Lathrop Cook

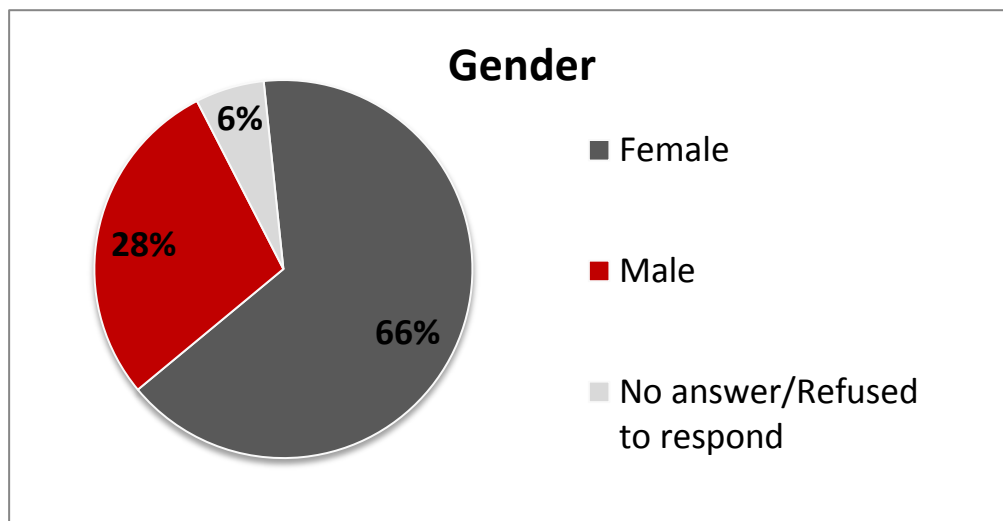
The goal of this research brief is to provide an overview of characteristics of men attending Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) parenting programs in New York State between 2009 and 2013. Additionally, the brief concludes by offering strategies for more effectively involving men in future parenting efforts.

### Men Who Attend CCE Parenting Programs.

The Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) system offers a variety of programs for parents and caregivers. Offered at CCE associations throughout New York, these programs reach a wide range of families and seek to promote positive parenting and, ultimately, healthy family and child development. This section

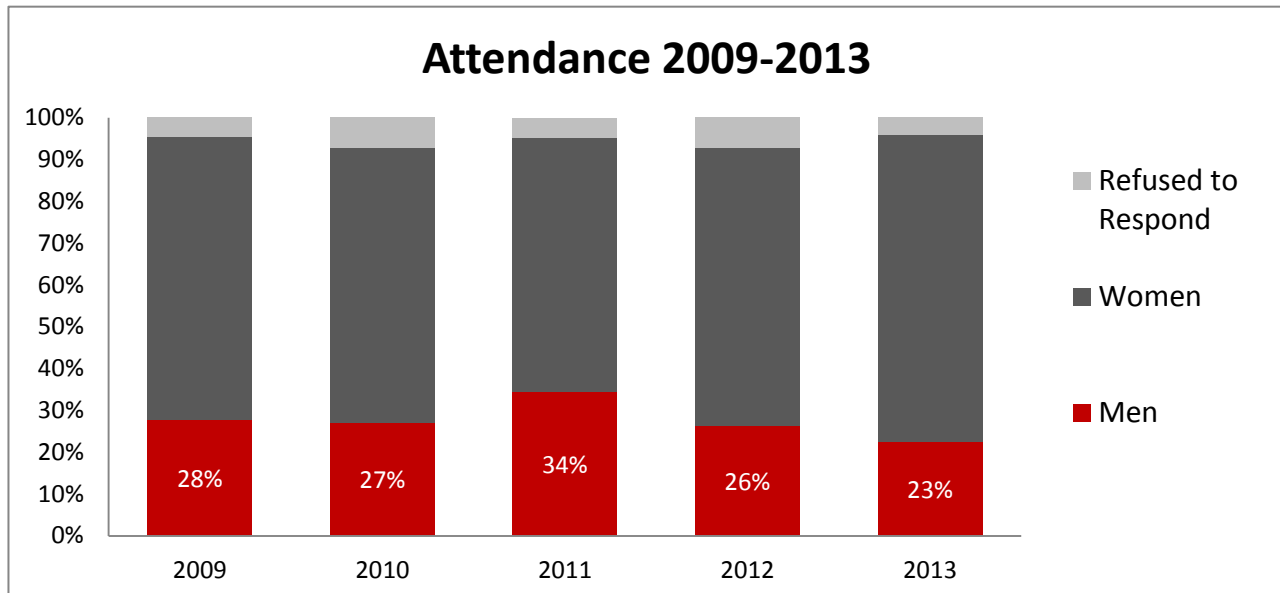
presents data collected from male participants in CCE parent education classes between 2009 and 2013. Data were collected from participants at the first session (a pre-test) and at the last session (a post-test). Between the years 2009 and 2013 a total of 2,935 participants took part in programs. A majority of these participants were female (66%) with 28% of participants being male.

The following summaries use data from 835 men who completed a pre-test survey given at the first session of their parenting class. Attendance has varied throughout the past few years, with the highest proportion of men attending CCE classes occurring in 2011 (34%) with a drop in male attendance in 2013 with 23%.



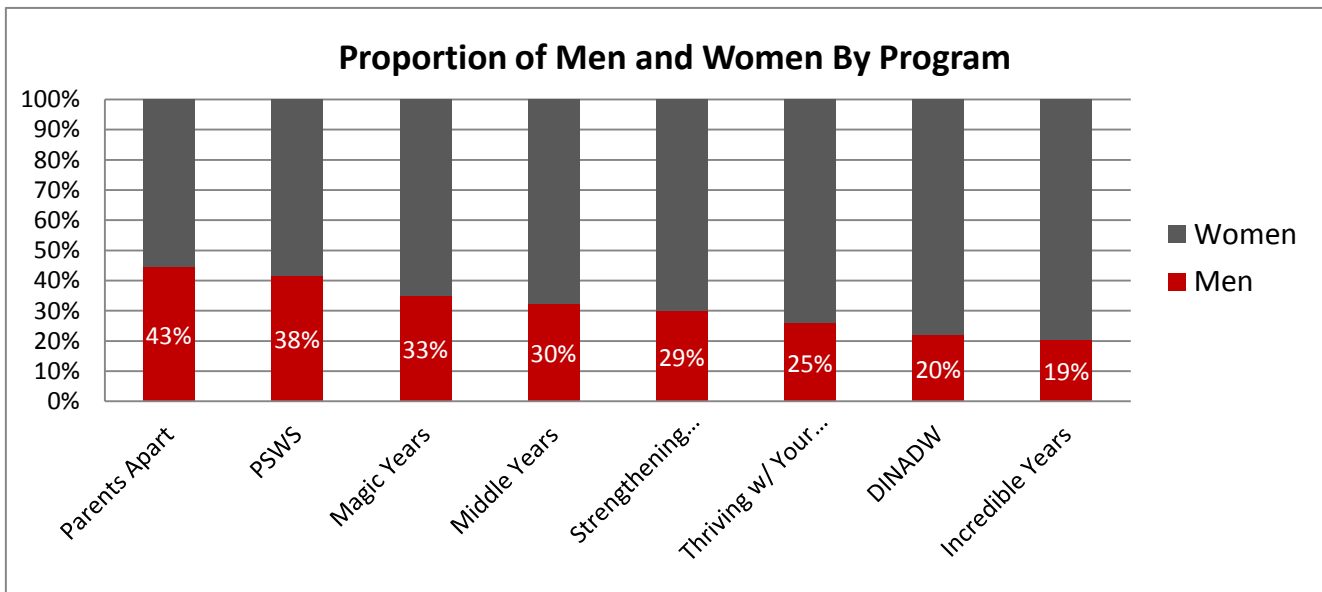
Between the years 2009 and 2013, male CCE parent education

participants attended a total of thirteen parent education programs.

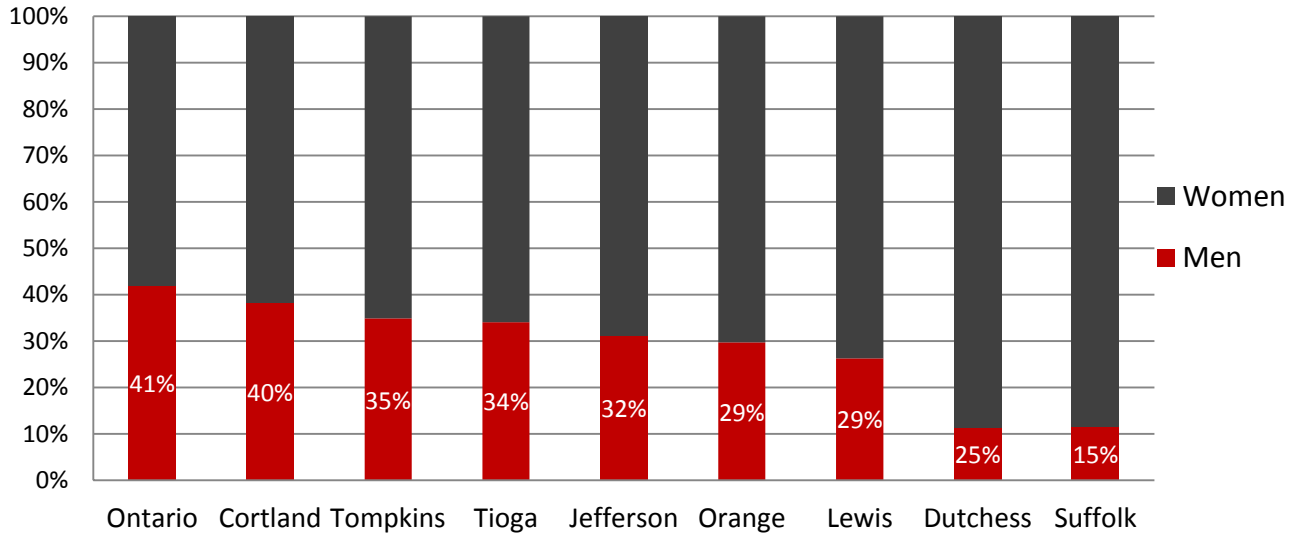


Below depicts the proportion of men and women attending various CCE parenting programs across New York State. Parents Apart reported the highest proportion of men attending their program (43%), followed by the Parenting Skills Workshop Series (38%) and the Magic Years Program (33%)

(33%). In addition, men participated in classes in thirteen counties throughout the state. Ontario County reported the highest proportion of men attending a parenting program (41%), followed by Cortland (40%) and Tompkins (35%). Please note, programs that report fewer than 75



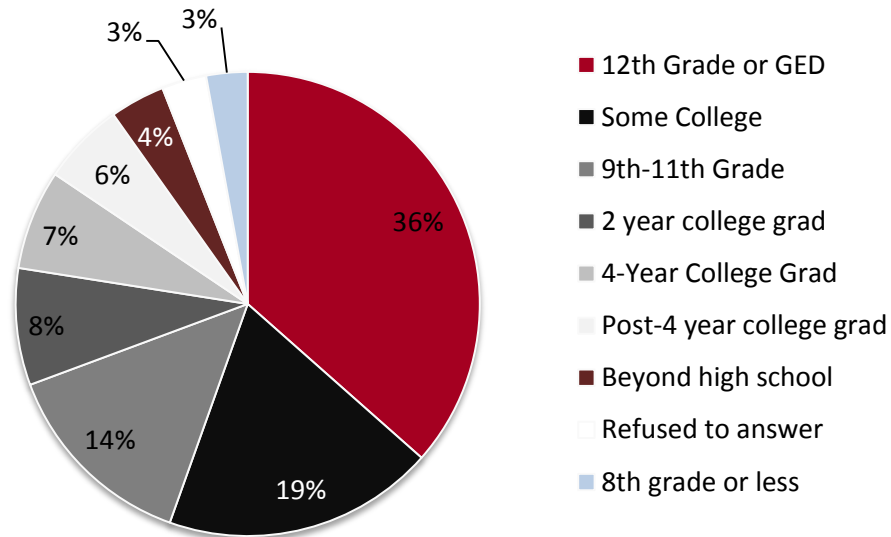
### Proportion of Men and Women By County



participants have not been included in the proportion charts. The level of educational attainment among the men varied widely, with the greatest number of participants

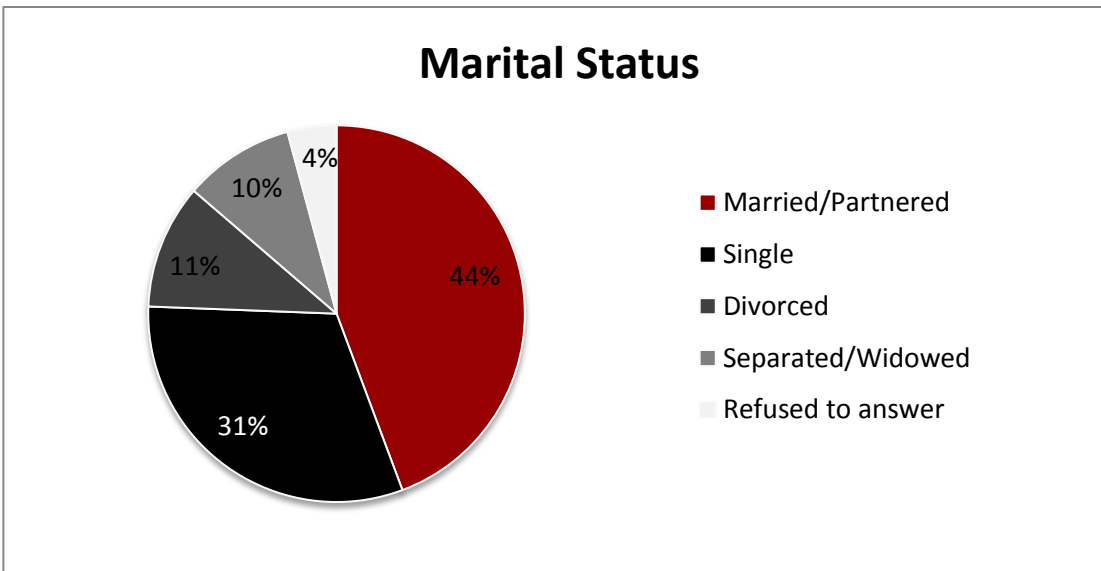
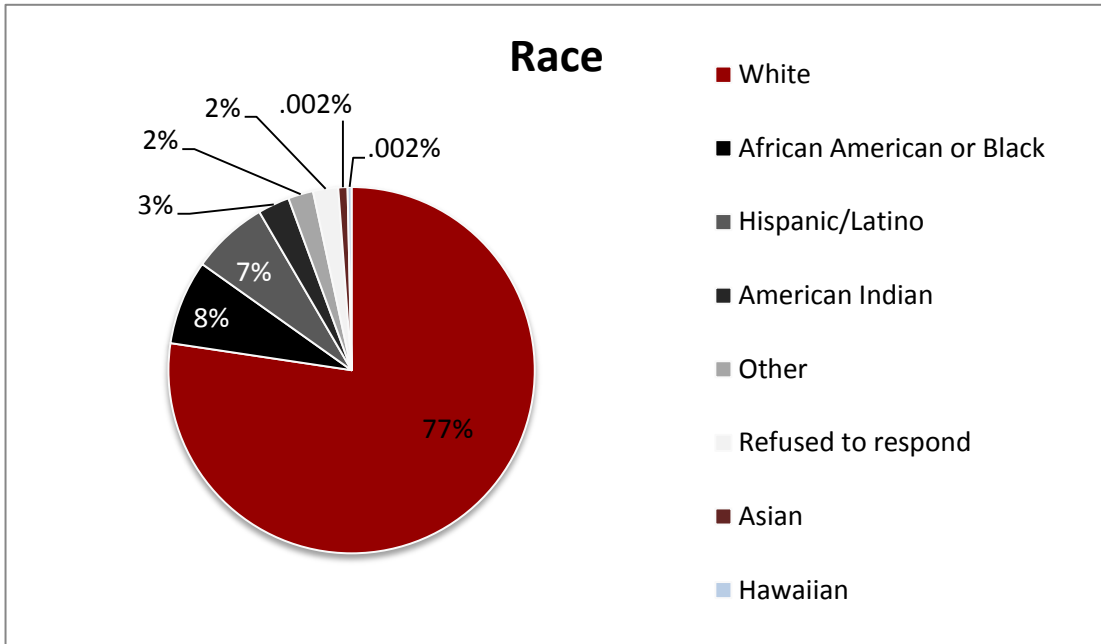
reaching 12<sup>th</sup> grade or completing their GED (36%) followed by those having attended, but not graduated from college (19%).

### Education



The vast majority of men attending CCE parenting education classes between 2009 and 2013 were white

(77%) and the largest group were married or partnered (44%).



## Pre-Post Survey Results of Men, 2009-2013.

This study used a pre- and post-test evaluation in which the participants were asked to answer two identical surveys—one given at the first session of the class and another given after the completion of the last parenting class. The survey included ten questions about parenting attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge designed to capture some of what was taught in the class. The pre- post-study design allows researchers to see if attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge change during the course of the workshop. Using this type of research design does not allow one to determine whether taking part in the parent education class caused a change in knowledge, attitude or behaviors; such changes could occur for other reasons outside of the workshop. However, it is possible that any significant pre-to-post changes in parenting attitudes, behaviors and knowledge that are observed may have resulted from taking part in the program.

The following evaluation is based on information provided by 605 male participants who completed both a pre- and post-test survey between the years 2009 and 2013. The evaluation also includes 1,372 female participants who completed their program and completed both a pre-

and a post-test survey. All ten of the measures showed significant improvements from the pre- to the post-test at the ten percent level for women. However, male outcomes yielded significant improvements for eight out of the ten measures. Specifically, men reported increased patience with their child, increased confidence in making rules that take their child's needs into consideration, increased belief that they have the skills necessary to be a good caregiver, decreases in how often they yell at their child, increased use of explanations for rules they make, increased time spent reading with their child, decreases in the number of hours their children spend watching television, and increased belief that they have enough people to count on when needed.

As previously mentioned, there were two questions that were not statistically significant for men:

- *How many times in the past week have you shown your child physical affection (kiss, hug, stroke hair, etc.)?*
- *How many times in the past week have you told another adult (spouse, friend, co-worker, visitor, relative) something positive about your child?*

It is possible that the differences between men's and women's outcomes are due to the limited amount of data collected from men, compared to women. With more data, the likelihood of seeing statistically significant results increases. However, taken in the context of how fatherhood identity and roles are changing, it is also plausible that men in this particular sample may associate physical touch and communicating about their child to other adults as less of a part of their parenting responsibilities than the women in this sample. As paternal roles continue to become more similar to maternal roles in future generations, we may see more significant outcomes for these particular measures.

### **Qualitative Responses from Men.**

At the end of a CCE parenting education course, participants complete a post-test. One question asks participants to recount the most important thing they have learned from attending their parenting class in one or two sentences. In total, 538 men provided a response to this open-ended question. Responses varied widely and were coded into ten general categories. The five most common themes that emerged are summarized below along with a few sample quotes.

### **1. Increasing confidence in fathering:**

- *“I found that the entire program was very helpful to me being a new parent. I'm not as afraid of my child anymore... I feel more prepared to deal with the future with my daughter.”*
- *“I learned that I am a pretty good dad.”*
- *“I was reminded of some of the basics to good parenting. I had my confidence bolstered because I am doing many things well.”*

### **2. Learning more effective ways to listen to and communicate with his child:**

- *“To make more time to listen to my child's feelings.”*
- *“How to better communicate with the kids. Allow them a safe atmosphere to open up.”*
- *“Self-control - keeping patient and listen to the child, besides cutting them off or yelling at them when they try to explain a situation to me.”*

### **3. Learning better discipline strategies:**

- *“I have learned to include my son in decision making, to explain why rules are there and what they mean.”*
- *“Ways to positively discipline the kids while at the same time teaching them that our love is unconditional.”*
- *“How to discipline my child without verbal or physical abuse.”*

#### **4. Becoming more involved in everyday, routine childcare activities:**

- *“How to be a father and treat my son with all my love and care. To play with my son more and interact with more when I get home.”*
- *“Be more involved with my child, be a role model.”*

#### **5. Meeting other families that are experiencing similar situations and questions:**

- *“Meet other parents and share knowledge or ideas to use everyday.”*
- *“I learned that many parents are dealing with the same issues that we are.”*
- *“I’m not alone.”*

- *“There are similar people with similar problems, facing the same situations that I have or will eventually have.”*

### **How to Involve More Men in Parenting Education Efforts.**

There are many different ways to recruit and engage men in parenting education efforts. A majority of the recommendations offered in this section are from various parenting experts working with fathers.

**Ask men what works for them.** Tim Jahn, Human Ecology Specialist from CCE of Suffolk County, recently created and distributed a poll for parents in Suffolk County. The goal of this survey was to better understand parenting education needs in their county. Parents were asked what days were best to hold parenting classes, which method of contact they preferred, what topics they would like covered in parenting classes, among many other questions. About 15% of their responses were from fathers (12 surveys). Interestingly, the results from the survey reveal that there was no difference between the mothers’ and fathers’ responses.

This information is valuable for their particular county because, from the survey results, they have learned that they do not need to tailor advertising differently for men, than for women.

However, fathers' responses will likely vary across areas, so it is helpful to find ways to reach out to men in your county to understand their specific needs. In other counties, you may find that fathers' responses differ dramatically from mothers. If this were the case, parent educators could adjust advertising and scheduling strategies to accommodate these differences. Ideally, counties could survey a wide range of fathers to better understand their specific needs, however, if this is not possible, educators could conduct a simple poll during the first class of a parenting course to ensure men's needs are taken into account.

**Advertise incentives separately for each parent.** If funding allows, incentives are a useful tool to recruit parents to attend parenting classes. For those using incentives, it is common to offer one small incentive per family (such as a \$5 coupon for gas or groceries) however this sends the message that only one family member needs to attend the parenting class. Instead, if funding allows, men may feel more motivation to attend if incentives are offered to each parent who attends.

**Consider the time, location, and length of classes.** Any working parent will be unable to attend a parenting class that coincides with their work schedule. To accommodate work schedules, many parenting classes are

scheduled at night or on weekends. However, there may be certain days or times that work best for fathers who are considering attending. If possible, reach out to parents prior to beginning a class to get a sense of their scheduling constraints. Of course you will not be able to accommodate everyone's schedule, but by connecting with parents, educators will get a better sense of their individual needs.

If it is not possible to collect feedback prior to class, parent educators can still ask participants their preferences about time, location, and length of class once the class has ended. This feedback can then be used when parent educators are deciding on scheduling and location details for future classes. One particular study interviewed over 100 parents to determine what barriers hindered parents from attending parenting classes. When asked where parents preferred to meet for classes, they responded that the most convenient sites were locations that they visit on a regular basis such as doctor's offices, child care centers, churches, or health centers (Johnson, Harrison, Burnett, & Emerson, 2003).

**Communicate expectations.** Many parents are unsure if they need to attend every session of a parenting class. Sometimes parents feel that as long as one parent attends the class, that parent can fill in their partner on



the information later. While this may be a viable last resort, it should not be their goal. In fact, some parenting programs are designed to include both parents and are most effective when both parents attend every session. While being sensitive to busy schedules and childcare constraints, parent educators should be direct and specific in the first session (or even before the class begins) that the ideal is for both parents to attend every class. Be sure to explain why it is important that both parents attend and the benefits that they will experience if they are both present.

**Review your curriculum: Is it sensitive to fathers?** The roles of fatherhood are changing. Most fathers are no longer solely defined as the breadwinner for their family; rather they are engaged in many facets of parenting. Unfortunately, past societal customs can take longer to adjust to current fathering identities. Likewise, some parenting curriculums may be outdated and include activities, phrases, research, or scenarios that are not sensitive to fathers. Prior to a parenting class, parent educators should review their materials, such as photos, group activities, role-play scenarios, and pronouns used in examples (interchangeably using she and he) to see if any slight adjustments are needed.

**Consider including an add-on session, just for men.** If you find that

even after utilizing some of the strategies previously discussed, men are still not attending parenting classes, one suggestion is to offer an additional class just for men. Throughout the regular course, parent educators can ask participants if they have a male partner interested in attending a one time class for men. If there is interest, pick a time location that is convenient for these men and even ask topics these men would like covered. The one time session, with other men, on topics they are interested in may be what these men need for a first time experience with parenting education classes. If it goes well, these fathers may be more open to attending full classes in the future.

### **Conclusion.**

Eight of ten measures of parenting attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge improved significantly from the pre- to the post-test. This suggests that, across the state, CCE parent education programs may have a positive impact on men. However, between the years 2009 and 2013, overall male participation in CCE parenting programs is significantly less compared to female involvement (28% male participation and 66% female participation).

If possible, parent educators, and all those who work with fathers, should assess whether their programs, resources, and policies encourage male participation. We also suggest

that parent educators consider the suggestions offered in this brief to

increase male participation in their own particular parenting programs.

## **Reference.**

Johnson, D. C., Harrison, B. C., Burnett, M. F., & Emerson, P. (2003). Deterrents to participation in parenting education. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 31, 403-424.

**Visit the *Parenting Project* website at:**

<https://www.human.cornell.edu/engagement/parenting-project>

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