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NRFC Tips for Fatherhood Professionals

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LIGHTS! CAMERA! DADS! USING FILMS TO ENGAGE FATHERS

Those working with fathers in groups frequently face the challenge of sparking meaningful discussions during which men can open up about their experiences, emotions, and concerns. Some group facilitators have found movies to be an effective strategy for launching conversation that tackles important, and often personal, issues for dads.

Viewing and speaking about full-length films or movie clips, even television commercials, can be a non-threatening way to draw men into discussions. With the film as the focus of the conversation, men are more likely to participate because they are talking about what they have observed. When certain behaviors or decisions are depicted in films, group members can comment on them as someone else's problem. They are not required to demonstrate to others the kind of vulnerability it often takes to discuss their personal behaviors and decisions. In such a safe and comfortable environment, fathers are more willing to express their thoughts and raise questions about issues that trouble them. But they do not have to worry about others in the group disrespecting or ignoring their ideas because they relate to situations that happened on the screen.

Men's thoughts and emotions can be as powerful as anyone else's. But a struggle between the head and the heart often prevents men from saying what they feel. They often are content to be silent, hoping things will work out on their own.

Films whose characters have positive relationships, show healthy intimacy, communicate appropriately, make up for past mistakes, or have an influential mentor or life coach can demonstrate to fathers the options they have in their own lives.

The Last Samurai is just one example of a father-friendly film. The action-filled story follows the relationship between Captain Algren, a disillusioned, alcoholic Civil War hero, and the highly disciplined samurai, Katsumoto. The film charts the course of their interactions and highlights how one man can have a tremendous influence on the life of another, challenging his beliefs and forcing him to confront the emotional baggage from his past.

This film can generate discussion about the ways a man can change and recover from poor choices, which can be particularly pertinent for men on probation or parole. You can talk about the possibility of change and how much is realistic. You might exchange ideas about the steps a man can take to change and the people in his life who can help him make responsible choices for himself and his family.

With a full-length film such as *The Last Samurai*, consider watching in sections over three or four group meetings. Although many important topics are presented through the film, you might focus only on one or two. For example, perhaps you could emphasize how a mentor or life coach can have a significant impact on a man's life, if he will allow it, and that mentors can be any gender or age and be part of a man's life for a lifetime or only a short time.

Before you view each section, hand out several questions about the characters in the film and several about how the film relates to the lives of the men in your group. Your discussions might even extend beyond the viewing sessions as the dads explore the difficulties the characters faced and how they relate to those experiences.

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

Here are some probing questions to kick off your discussions:

- Describe Captain Algren's character. What kind of man is he?
- In your opinion, what are his strengths?
- In your opinion, what are his character flaws or weaknesses?
- Do you possess any of his strengths or weaknesses? Which ones are similar to yours?
- In your opinion, what are some of the masks or pretenses that Captain Algren uses to hide from the truth and himself?
- Who do you see as potential mentors or teachers in his life?
- Do you use any masks or pretenses to hide your true self from others?
- In your opinion, what influences Captain Algren's decision to change his attitude and behavior?
- Which mentors do you feel had the most influence on him? In your opinion, what did they do or say that influenced him the most?
- Even with a change in his character, what weaknesses or flaws do you see him still struggling with?
- In your opinion, what do you expect from and look for in a mentor?
- What do you admire most about Katsumoto's character?
- Who were the mentors or teachers who influenced Katsumoto's character development?
- As a mentor, who did Katsumoto influence and how did it affect their lives?
- In your opinion, who do you admire most in this film and why?

In addition, the film can direct the group's discussion to related topics such as how family heritage influences us, the Seven Principles of Bushido, and the idea of developing a personal creed or mission statement for their lives. Ask the men how their own thinking about relationships changed as they watched the characters in the film interact.

Using films to engage fathers allows you and the group to broach subjects many of them may never have thought about before. Whether you examine an entire film or just selected clips, remember to:

- Stay focused. Preview the film and identify a specific issue, virtue, or lesson you are going to discuss. Too many topics under discussion can create confusion.
- Develop discussion questions as you preview the film and give them to the men before the showing. Begin to explore the topic before you watch the film or clips.
- Remain on topic. A variety of issues may be raised in the film, but if the discussion strays too far, the men might miss the message.
- Choose films carefully. Unless your identified topic happens to be controversial, avoid films that deal with controversial issues.
- Be sure to select a film that is culturally appropriate for your fathers.
- Rewind and replay key scenes that offer extraordinary opportunity for exchanging ideas and learning.
- Use films sparingly in your group sessions. Although films can greatly enhance learning and growth, relying on them too frequently merely becomes entertainment.

Literally thousands of films have the potential to engage group members in revealing discussions that help them evolve as fathers and as men. Start your program's film library with some of these that treat challenging topics:

- Liar Liar** Relationships and honesty
- Finding Nemo** Overprotective parents, friendships, and sacrifice
- The Notebook** Lifelong love, sacrifice, and family
- Cars** Pride and ego, loyalties, and friendships
- Antwone Fisher** Overcoming a painful past, need for reaching out for help, healing
- The Rookie** Importance of a father's blessing to his child
- Drumline** Being honest, forgiving, holding grudges, great leadership
- The Santa Clause** Being true to who you are and truthful with your children, stepfathers
- Ice Age** Letting go of the past
- Brother Bear** Being true to your beliefs
- Flushed Away** Being real, knowing the meaning of family
- The Wild Thornberrys Movie** Listening to your children
- Mr. Smith Goes to Washington** Paying the price to stand by your principles
- Jack Frost** Make the most of each day, life without regrets
- We Were Soldiers** Faith, family, and importance of leadership
- Stand By Me** Not judging a book by its cover
- Homeward Bound** Love runs deep and never gives up, stepfathers, and the process of loving