



ISSUE BRIEF

# STRONG FAMILIES

## How can we better engage fathers in prevention?

Fathers have a critical role to play in children's physical, emotional, and social development and are essential partners in the prevention of maltreatment and achievement of timely permanence. A range of organizational strategies and resources are available for child welfare leaders who want to better support fatherhood initiatives and interventions in order to improve children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

### The essential role of fathers

Studies have highlighted myriad benefits of father involvement for child safety and well-being:<sup>1</sup>

- Non-residential fathers may play a role in ameliorating the circumstances that led to abuse.
- Non-resident fathers' involvement with their children is associated with a higher likelihood of a reunification outcome and a lower likelihood of an adoption outcome.
- Children with highly involved non-resident fathers are discharged from foster care more quickly than those whose fathers have less or no involvement.



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- For children who are reunited with a parent, usually their mother, higher levels of non-resident father involvement are associated with a substantially lower likelihood of subsequent maltreatment allegations.

## Having an involved father:<sup>2</sup>

- Lets a child know that he/she is loved
- Helps a child learn important life skills
- Provides a child with greater financial resources
- Lowers a child's chances for early sexual activity
- Provides a child with a positive male role model
- Lowers a child's chances for school failure
- Provides a child with emotional support
- Lowers a child's chances for juvenile delinquency
- Enhances a child's self-esteem
- Lowers a child's chances for adult criminality
- Enhances a child's intellectual development
- Provides a child with a sense of physical and emotional security
- Provides a child with guidance and discipline
- Facilitates a child's moral development
- Gives a child someone to play with
- Promotes a healthy gender identity in a child

- Provides a child with someone to talk to when he/she has questions
- Provides a child with an alternative perspective on life

Too often, however, child-serving systems discount the importance of fathers' involvement in the lives of their children, treating payment of child support as the fathers' only critical responsibility and method of connection. Even as initiatives and investments designed to build protective factors among children have grown, father-specific programs and resources have continued to be developed at the margins, if at all.<sup>3</sup>

While financial support is important, data show that outcomes for children improve not by virtue of financial support alone, but also through high-quality relationships and safe and healthy interactions between fathers and children.<sup>2</sup> Engaging fathers and connecting them with the right kinds of services and supports can directly impact the way fathers contribute to their child's development, yet there are a number of issues that impact men's experiences across multiple systems and influence their ability and willingness to engage in meaningful and consistent ways.<sup>4</sup> These potential barriers include:

1. Child welfare professional and systemic bias (e.g., case names reflect mother);
2. Overburdened workers who may be hesitant to take the time to locate and involve non-custodial fathers;

Building a 21st century child welfare system means we are all in the same boat, paddling together in the same direction, and we finally reach the far shore – with wise intention and kindness to all families, including the full engagement and respect of fathers in the process.

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3. Mothers' gate-keeping;
4. Characteristics of non-custodial fathers that make them less accessible (i.e., incarceration, homelessness, impairment by substance abuse, military enlistment, etc.);
5. Lack of father-specific services and supports;
6. Child welfare professionals' reluctance to involve male perpetrators in planning and service delivery; and
7. Dynamics around domestic violence.<sup>5</sup>

## Strengthening father engagement across the child welfare system

The sections that follow offer a selection of strategies and resources to support fatherhood initiatives and interventions in the context of child welfare and prevention of maltreatment.

### Organizational assessment and planning for enhanced father involvement

Several resources have been created to help guide the development of fatherhood approaches and initiatives in child-serving systems. [A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care](#) highlights a range of organizational efforts, outreach and engagement activities, and programming and training interventions to support father involvement. It also provides tips regarding special populations, such as young fathers, grandfathers, fathers who are involved with child welfare, have substance use issues, or are incarcerated, LGBTQ fathers, and fathers from diverse cultures. The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse's [Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit](#) offers a framework and activities for building and sustaining responsible fatherhood programs, including for special topics such as fathers of children with special needs, fatherhood issues in the context of the child welfare system, cultural competence issues, non-residential fathers, young fathers, and fathers navigating incarceration and re-entry.

### Dedicated staff to support fathers

To nurture father engagement at all stages of a child and family's involvement with the child welfare system, some agencies have developed positions to provide specialized support and services for fathers. At the **Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Department of Human Services' Office of Children, Youth and Families**, [father engagement specialists](#) (FES) are available to work with fathers one-on-one to help support closer relationships with their children, families and communities. Father engagement specialists are not caseworkers, but work alongside caseworkers: they have the flexibility to meet fathers at times and locations that are convenient for them, and to work on specific issues that may be deemed important to the father. They may be assigned to or requested by fathers.

### Father search and engagement

Effectively locating and engaging fathers in the context of child welfare includes the development and implementation of a robust family search and engagement framework, including **identification, making initial contact, family group conferencing, assessment, and safety and permanency planning**. For more information, please explore [What are some examples of effective family search and engagement?](#)

### Provider networks focused on fathers

**Allegheny County's Department of Human Services** offers fatherhood programming through its network of [Family Support Centers](#), and the [Fathers Collaborative Council of Western Pennsylvania](#). In 2016, the **Indiana Department of Child Services** issued a request for proposals to [build its network of providers](#) to implement fatherhood programming offering assistance and support to fathers whose children are involved with DCS. Following provider selection, [fatherhood service standards](#) were implemented to support providers in working actively with DCS employees to successfully engage fathers in services to improve their children's safety, stability, well-being, and permanency, as well as assist fathers in strengthening their relationships

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with their children and promote positive relationships between families and their case managers.

## Home visiting with fathers

Home visiting programs tend to focus on pregnant women and mothers of young children; however, some home visiting programs have begun to recognize the important role fathers play in children's lives, implementing strategies to better engage fathers in these important services. In 2015, the Urban Institute conducted in-depth qualitative interviews across five home visiting sites with more than 40 fathers, to better understand how home visiting programs engage fathers, what fathers' experiences have been in those programs, and the perceived benefits of fathers' participation.<sup>6</sup> Key findings included:

- **Home visiting programs implement different approaches to engage fathers.** Some programs include fathers in home visits that target mothers, whereas other programs provide separate home visits for mothers and fathers.
- **Some programs have broader fatherhood programs that include peer support groups and outings as well as events with other participating families.** Participation in group activities complements one-on-one home visits, and home visits with mothers are also used as an opportunity to recruit fathers for separate fatherhood program activities.
- **Programs implement multiple strategies to reach fathers and keep them engaged.** Programs encourage fathers' participation by offering separate home visits; assigning home visitors who best fit the fathers' needs; tailoring the content of activities to be hands-on and specific to fathers' needs; and providing incentives, such as free diapers and gift cards. Home visitors engage fathers by connecting with them as trusted mentors and advocates, being persistent but patient and nonjudgmental, and being flexible and accommodating fathers' schedules.

- **Home visitors face challenges recruiting and engaging fathers.** Working fathers and fathers who live separately from children often cannot participate in home visits. Some mothers and grandparents prevent the fathers' participation. Teen parents are particularly hard to serve, because of their level of maturity and unstable relationships.
- **Fathers report the benefits of participation in home visits and other program activities.** They report improving their parenting skills, learning to manage their anger and communicate better with partners, and gaining access to employment and referrals to community services.

In 2016, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services contracted with the Child and Family Research Partnership to conduct the Father Participation and Retention Evaluation, which examined whether fathers' involvement in home visiting programs in Texas was related to length of enrollment and engagement. Findings indicated that **families whose fathers participated in at least one home visit were enrolled for an average of 17.2 months, nearly seven months longer than the average 10.6-month enrollment of families whose fathers did not participate in any home visits.**

## Fatherhood education and training

Fatherhood training programs typically focus on helping fathers play a positive role in the lives of their children, which includes the provision of emotional and material supports. Programs typically teach parenting and co-parenting skills and provide assistance to help fathers improve their economic stability.<sup>7</sup> A systemic review of the research on 70 responsible fatherhood and other family-strengthening programs found that the programs primarily delivered parent education through curriculum-based group sessions offering knowledge- and skill-building activities to improve father-child interaction, and focus on: appropriate discipline; play skills; encouragement of children's self-expression; and knowledge of child development.<sup>8</sup>

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A number of counties in California, including Contra Costa County Children and Family Services, have been implementing SFI.

An evaluation found that, as a result of the intervention:

1. Families and children were healthier when fathers became more involved with parenting and were working with mothers as co-parents and partners;
2. Parents experienced reduced stress and anxiety and were more satisfied with their relationships; and,
3. Children were less hyperactive and aggressive.

- [Engaging Fathers as a Strategy for Child Welfare Practice](#)

[Supporting Father Involvement](#) (SFI) is rated by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse as supported by research evidence. The curriculum targets five aspects of family life for intervention to enhance fathers' involvement: (1) both partners' individual well-being; (2) the quality of the relationship between the parents; (3) the quality of relationship between parent and child; (4) breaking negative cycles across generations; and (5) coping with life stress and enhancing social support. Group training sessions with four to eight couples or 10 to 12 fathers follow the curriculum but include open-ended discussion of personal and family issues. Leaders are trained mental health professionals, and cultural sensitivity is maintained in intervention approach, language, and curriculum materials. Meetings are held at dinnertime to meet the schedules of working families. Food and childcare are provided, along with case management, for all families enrolled in the program.

In 2015, the Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) Division of the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) launched the [Fatherhood EFFECT](#) program — **Educating Fathers for Empowering Children Tomorrow** — to encourage and support healthy father engagement by providing evidence-based fatherhood programs in various agencies and communities across the state. The evaluation found that fathers who attended EFFECT programs find great value in them: “The support they find among other fathers, the guidance they receive from the program facilitators, and the community resources and supports that they access keep fathers coming back. Fathers report knowing how to communicate better with their children and the mother(s) of their children, and having an increased sense of confidence and efficacy as a father.”<sup>9</sup>

## Resource hub for fathers and staff working to support them

Some jurisdictions have created dedicated space on their websites offering a range of resources for fathers and to support staff working with fathers. For example, the **Texas Department of Family and Protective Services** (DFPS) offers a web section on responsible fathering, regularly updates a [programming and resource list](#), and maintains a [list of tip sheets](#) for staff and providers to share with fathers:

- [Father's Toolkit](#)
- [Playing with Children](#)
- [Advice to Fathers Who Are Out of the Home](#)
- [Ten Ways to Be a Better Dad](#)
- [Caring for New Moms](#)
- [It's a Matter of Pride: Being a Good Role Model](#)
- [Re-Connecting with Your Kids After A Long Absence](#)
- [Tips from a Father in Prison](#)

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- [Practical Tips for Knowing Your Child: Nontrivial Questions](#)
- [16 Things Fathers Can Do to Support Their Pregnant Partners](#)
- [Troubleshooter's Guide to Crying Babies](#)
- [20 Long Distance Activities for Dads at a Distance](#)
- [Disciplining Children Appropriately](#)

To learn more, see related resources at [Questions from the field](#).

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