



Strengthening Partnerships Between Fatherhood and Human Services Programs to Improve Father Engagement

April 2022

Armando Yañez and Rebekah Selekman

Introduction

Fathers want to be involved in their children’s lives, but many human services programs have not historically focused on supporting fathers. Moreover, positive father involvement is critical for child health and well-being, and it positively affects health and well-being for mothers and fathers. Because of the important contributions that fathers make to the well-being of children and families, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) encourages state and local human services agencies to improve father engagement in human services programs. Some programs have explicitly focused on serving fathers, such as Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs administered by HHS, and other programs that have historically served mothers are now focusing more on father engagement. In doing so, these programs are acknowledging that incorporating fathers into their services can improve program goals and outcomes for the families they serve.¹

Box 1. Key findings

Strategies for developing and sustaining partnerships

- When identifying potential partner organizations, consider the organization’s characteristics, its reputation among fathers, and the extent to which a partnership will be mutually beneficial.
 - Demonstrate commitment to the partnership by attending meetings and other events hosted by partners, thereby establishing a strong working relationship.
 - Partner with fathers by involving them as much as possible in all aspects of program design.▲
-

How to use this guide

This practice guide is a resource for a broad range of human services and fatherhood programs striving to be more inclusive of and responsive to fathers. Building on literature from the field and interviews with human services providers that engage fathers in services, this guide outlines the benefits of developing community partnerships between father-focused and other human services programs. It also describes various strategies programs can use to develop partnerships that can increase father engagement in programming and improve outcomes for fathers and their families. The goal of this guide is to help programs develop strategic partnerships that are mutually beneficial and can increase father engagement in their communities.

This practice guide highlights key strategies for developing partnerships that primarily rely on contractual agreements between organizations to fill a specific role, also known as supplemental partnerships. In supplemental partnerships, one organization supplements the core services the lead agency offers. However, the strategies in this guide could also apply to integrated partnerships in which multiple partners have an equal role in providing core program services.



An important way that human services programs can improve father engagement in their services is by partnering with community-based agencies that focus on fathers. Fatherhood programs can also benefit because these partnerships strengthen fathers' engagement in their services. Rather than working in silos and attempting to address the needs of fathers on their own, **human services and fatherhood programs can strengthen community partnerships with one another and increase father engagement in services that promote child and family well-being.** Community partnerships also offer human services and fatherhood programs the opportunity to expand recruitment and retention efforts and broaden the array of available services for fathers.

Benefits of developing partnerships with the community



Father engagement experts and father-serving practitioners agree that partnerships are central to meeting the needs of fathers and families. Although **partnerships might vary based on the level of formality and coordination between partners**, actively seeking, developing, and sustaining community is critical to successfully engage fathers in services and can benefit children and families, fathers, organizations, and communities.ⁱⁱ

Children and families

Partnerships between father-focused and other community-based human services organizations can improve outcomes for fathers' children and families. For example, when child welfare programs partner with fatherhood agencies, the fathers they serve can take advantage of training opportunities the fatherhood agency offers. These trainings can enhance the ability of child welfare agency staff to engage fathers and increase father involvement with the child. In turn, this can lead to greater placement stability for children in the child welfare system. Similarly, a Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) office in California partners with community-based father-serving organizations to help enroll single-parent fathers whose children are eligible for WIC benefits. Often, fathers do not realize they can access WIC services on behalf of their eligible children. WIC staff reported that partnering with father-serving organizations helps them reach fathers (and children) who might not have sought their services.

Fathers

Partnerships can also improve outcomes for fathers themselves, as these collaborations help programs serve participants more holistically and find more ways to address participant needs. Fathers often struggle to navigate human services systems, which can impede fathers' self-sufficiency and family involvement. Partnerships between fatherhood programs and service systems such as workforce development, child support services, child protective services, the courts, and the education systems can help fathers learn to navigate these systems and improve their ability to achieve stronger outcomes for themselves and their families in all these areas.

Partnerships can also improve fathers' experience in programs that serve them. For example, the California WIC agency mentioned earlier described that its partnership with a local fatherhood program helped WIC staff become more understanding of the cultural norms exhibited by the fathers they serve. WIC staff participated in a training on *machismo*—a term for strong masculine pride in Latin American culture. WIC staff reported that the training provided them with knowledge on how to work with fathers who demonstrate *machismo*, which has led to a more inclusive program culture.

“Fatherhood programs are achieving their programmatic outcomes, but without partnerships, they cannot help fathers get better. If [programs] don't support [fathers] in navigating the systems they're involved with after they leave the programs, [fathers] might continue to struggle with the courts, parenting, and so on. [We] want to continue supporting fathers beyond the 12 weeks of their programming.”

– Good+Foundation

Organizations

Partnerships create additional benefits for programs by encouraging organizations to share resources, such as helping programs with limited funds find ways to engage fathers more thoroughly. Human services practitioners noted that partnering with fatherhood programs helps expand the otherwise limited reach of their programs. Conversely, fatherhood program staff and directors often noted that partner agencies help them achieve their programmatic outcomes by providing funding, resources, or connections to additional supports for the fathers they serve. Partner organizations can also be a recruitment or referral source for one another. For instance, developing partnerships with organizations such as employment service providers and health clinics can expand the reach of an organization without requiring more recruitment efforts by organization staff.

Communities

Partnerships can benefit the community by increasing the value that community members place on father well-being and by connecting community members, including fathers and nonfathers. Some organizations have recognized that there is a historical bias that often assumes fathers should be capable of taking care of themselves and their families. To challenge these perceptions, one father-focused program, ForeverDads, actively seeks representatives from different facets of its community to participate in its board of directors. These board members represent employers, social services, the court system, law enforcement, and the school system. ForeverDads finds that having diverse community member representation on its board increases the number of community members learning about fathers' challenges and the importance of engaging with fathers. The growing number of community members providing funding to and volunteering their time with ForeverDads demonstrates a change in perspective about father engagement among community members. Another program, the Center for Urban Families (CFUF), also works to enhance community-level commitment to fathers. One representative from CFUF described that embracing the importance of father engagement can address

broader community-level issues or challenges, such as unemployment. For instance, CFUF operates STRIVE Baltimore, a program that leverages CFUF’s dedication to partnering with community members, including local businesses. STRIVE staff work with employers to understand their staffing needs and match STRIVE program fathers with employers that can meet those needs. Through these partnerships, local employers become invested in the success of CFUF and the fathers they serve.

For more than 14 years, the Fathers and Families Center (FFC) in Indianapolis has partnered with and received funding from EmployIndy, Marion County’s Workforce Investment Board, to increase the employability of fathers. FFC also partners with vocational trainers to prepare fathers for high-demand workforce sectors popular in the region. These partnerships enable FFC to offer a pipeline of sustainable jobs and careers to program participants. FFC also partners with local justice systems, social services providers, faith-based organizations, and educational institutions to ensure participants are connected to the supports they need. Because of these strong partnerships, FFC was able to continue delivering critical services early in the COVID-19 pandemic, helping participants meet basic needs; obtain job placements; complete education and training; receive mental, emotional, and physical health services; and receive advocacy services. (ACF Future of Fatherhood Report, 2019).ⁱⁱⁱ



Developing relationships with community partners

Developing partnerships between fatherhood and other human services programs is important to successfully engage fathers in both types of programs. Partnerships can help provide complementary services that extend resources to fathers, serve as pathways to recruit fathers, and help organizations better achieve their goals. To develop new partnerships with community organizations, human services program leaders and staff can implement strategies to identify partnerships that are mutually beneficial and can expand the supports available to fathers. This includes developing partnerships with father-specific programs and other programs that serve the broader community. Below, we identify three

strategies for developing community partnerships to improve outcomes for children and families, fathers, organizations, and communities.



Identify partnerships that are a good fit for the organization

Human services program staff and leaders with whom we spoke identified three key considerations when determining if a potential partnership is a good fit for a human services organization.

Organization characteristics

Among the father-serving programs that contributed to this study, **some of the most common partner organizations included churches, schools, social services agencies and other nonprofits, local businesses and employers, law enforcement, the court system, and local philanthropies.** When choosing organizations with which to partner, practitioners described key structural and contextual characteristics that they considered (see Box 2). Potential partners do not need to have all these characteristics, but programs described them as being important factors to consider when deciding which partnerships to pursue. For example, one program representative described two characteristics that made churches an important partner. First, churches are a well-established gathering place within the community, including for fathers, thus serving as a location from which fathers can be referred to services. Second, the parishioners are members of the community, each person bringing their own connections. Sharing information about father-serving programs with parishioner is a low-cost strategy for spreading information to a broad group of community members. Thus, by partnering with the church, the program “created a tremendous web of connection at a very rapid pace” that could benefit fathers.

Box 2. Characteristics and factors to consider when developing community partnerships

Structural characteristics

- ✓ Is an established gathering spot (in person or virtually)
- ✓ Is part of a system that fathers often touch
- ✓ Supports children and families

Contextual factors

- ✓ Intentionally serves fathers
- ✓ Able to support work to address a gap in services
- ✓ Has a positive reputation in the community
- ✓ Can offer a useful perspective▲

Organizations' reputation among fathers

When identifying potential partners, **it is important to consider how fathers might perceive a partnership with certain organizations.** Some partner agencies might not be perceived as being inclusive of fathers, despite providing services that could benefit fathers and their families. For example, although men can experience intimate partner violence, many domestic violence programs focus primarily on serving women, as more women than men are survivors of intimate partner violence.^{iv,v} However, many such programs primarily want to improve family well-being while ensuring the safety of all family members, and programs are increasingly recognizing that men can benefit from domestic violence services. In addition to assuming fathers are the perpetrators of violence, historical exclusion of fathers from domestic violence services communicates low expectations of fathers' ability to change and marginalizes the fathers' role in the family.^{vi} Partnerships between father-focused and domestic violence programs could be valuable, especially if a father-serving program can demonstrate to fathers that the goals of the programs are aligned. These partnerships can potentially safely enhance fathers' involvement in the family.^{vii}

Alternatively, partnering with certain organizations or agencies could be a detriment to a program’s ability to engage with fathers. The San Diego Paternal Opportunities Program shared that its decision not to partner with the local child welfare agency helped it build and maintain trust with the fathers they serve. Fathers in their primary population perceived the child welfare agency as trying to take away their children, so some fathers struggled with whether they could trust a program that partnered with that agency. In other communities or contexts, however, a partnership with the child welfare agency could be particularly beneficial; it is important to consider what makes sense for a particular program and community. How a

Benefits to both organizations

Another way programs can determine if a partnership is a good fit is to **assess if the partnership will be mutually beneficial**. ForeverDads described that its entire [approach to partner development](#) is based on partnerships being mutually beneficial.¹

Therefore, as part of its approach to developing new human services partners, ForeverDads schedules an initial partnership development meeting with each prospective partner. During this meeting, ForeverDads describes its program and ask questions to learn more about the prospective partners’ goals, resources, and interest in offering fatherhood programming. ForeverDads also described that because it goes into each meeting with a specific request, it uses the meeting time to think through ways to implement the request with its partner. This has enabled ForeverDads to quickly formalize its partnerships. ForeverDads also stressed the importance of being responsive to the needs of its new partner to ensure the partnership is mutually beneficial and to support the partner’s buy-in. To do this, ForeverDads aims to promptly provide its partners with resources and information.

“I need to hear what’s a win for you; be transparent, how can we both arrive at our wins.”
– *The RIDGE Project on honoring and valuing partnerships*



Attend partners’ meetings to demonstrate commitment

Following the establishment of a mutually beneficial partnership, organizations can demonstrate their commitment to the partnership. One way to demonstrate commitment is to **attend meetings and other agency events hosted by the partner organization**. A representative from the Milwaukee Direct Assistance to Dads (DADs) Project, a home visiting program for fathers, described that staff from the DADs Project attend community events that its partners sponsor so its partners see staff actively participating in and [valuing the partnership](#).² In addition, the Good+Foundation, a national nonprofit providing support to families with low incomes, convenes partners every quarter. This helps establish a strong partnership among a network of service providers who are all working toward a common goal. These quarterly meetings are an opportunity for partners to share how they are working to support parents and creates a foundation for professional relationships that support service providers as they meet the needs of fathers, children, and families. In addition, other program staff described that attending monthly

¹ See the “Case Study of Father Engagement in Substance Use Disorder Treatment Programs: ForeverDads” for more information: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/foreverdads-case-study>.

² See KEEP Fathers Engaged video interview with Tony Higgins: <https://vimeo.com/669176929>.

meetings hosted by their partner agencies helps the program maintain awareness of the available services and resources their partners offer and keeps the partnership front of mind for both organizations.

Partner with fathers

Human services and fatherhood programs increasingly **recognize that those with lived experience are experts who should be involved as much as possible in all aspects of program design**. Because of this, organizations are increasingly looking to fathers for guidance on how to make their services more inclusive or to help inform the development of new services.³ Some organizations have developed a Fatherhood Advisory Group or Father Engagement Community Network that includes fathers in conversations about program goals, the types of services they are interested in receiving, the quality of existing partnerships, and the partnerships an organization should develop.^{viii} In addition, some organizations hire former participants, who are often responsible for recruiting and engaging fathers in services. Hiring former participants allows the program to benefit from ongoing and formal input from fathers as staff. The Good+Foundation includes fathers when developing program services, not only as partners but as experts. Box 3 offers a few tips from Good+Foundation on how to engage fathers as experts.



Box 3. How to include fathers as experts in developing program services

When partnering with fathers to develop program services, consider the following:

- Proactively seek the input of fathers during program development instead of only seeking their input when the program is not working.
- Ensure fathers play an active role in program design and implementation by providing them space to share what they want from the program, what it will take to keep them interested, and the amount of time they can devote to it. With this input, the program can offer services that fathers want and can receive.
- Include the perspectives of fathers who successfully complete the program and those who did not to identify service gaps.
- Recognize the harm and hurt that systems may have caused fathers.
- Value fathers' input the same way you value input from others more traditionally recognized as experts based on their professional or educational background. ▲

³ See “Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People with Lived Experience,” available at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/lived-experience-brief>.

Additional resources for father engagement strategies

This practice guide is one of many resources that highlight father engagement strategies in human services programs. Many federal and nongovernmental agencies have compiled resources specific to certain fields that might be useful for programs looking to develop and sustain community partnerships.

Federal agency resources and research	Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Key Programmatic Elements of Father Engagement to Promote Self-Sufficiency	▶ Three case studies and many other resources on how programs operating in human services fields have successfully engaged fathers.
	Office of Head Start	▶ Practice guides and tip sheets to demonstrate how to build relationships with fathers in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Includes guides on how to build and maximize community partnerships.
	The Children’s Bureau, Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative	▶ <i>How We Partner with the Community to Improve Service Options</i> podcast series. This series presents stories of how local child welfare agencies work with their community partners to support families and youth.
	The Office of Child Support Enforcement	▶ Fact sheets and guidance on how child support agencies work with community-based organizations to help meet parent needs. Includes resources on establishing partnerships to improve fathers’ family involvement.
	National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field	▶ Lessons learned and resources fatherhood programs use in diverse locales throughout the nation. Includes a section on cultivating community partners for project success.
Nongovernmental agency resources	Casey Family Programs	▶ Resources and strategies for engaging fathers in prevention services to improve children’s safety, permanency, and well-being. See Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care .
	CalWIC, Engaging Men and Dads at WIC: A Toolkit	▶ Tips, strategies, and resources that implementers can use to increase father engagement in WIC programs. Includes tips and strategies for engaging community partners.
	Promundo, CulturaSalud/EME, and Network of Men for Gender Equality (REDMAS): Program P, A Manual for Engaging Men in Fatherhood, Caregiving, and Maternal and Child Health	▶ The Program P manual, a compilation of interconnected strategies and action steps designed to reshape how local communities and governments, particularly the public health system, engage men as caregivers. Includes a section on building partnerships.
	Engaging Your Community: A Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration, and Action	▶ Toolkit developed for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health (now Office of Population Affairs). Offers tools and guidance for enhancing community partnerships among agencies that work on adolescent pregnancy prevention and parenting.

WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Highlighted programs

Arapahoe County Community and Child Support Services Division	Works to increase child support payments by increasing employment among noncustodial parents using a two-generational approach.
The California WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) Association (CalWIC)	Supports local WIC agencies throughout the state. Notably, it developed a toolkit of resources to help WIC agencies engage fathers in programming to improve child outcomes.
Center for Urban Families	Aims to address the most pressing issues in Baltimore, Maryland, such as poverty, unemployment, father absence, and family disintegration.
The Fathers and Families Center (FFC)	Provides men in Indianapolis, Indiana, with resources, guidance, and support to be great parents by placing an emphasis on empowering fathers.
ForeverDads	Serves six rural counties in Ohio. Its mission is to encourage, educate, and equip men to develop positive relationships with their children, family, and community.
The DAD (Direct Assistance to Dads) Project	Provides home visits to fathers, families, and children. A free, voluntary program through the Men's Health Center at the Milwaukee Department of Health in Wisconsin.
Good+Foundation	Provides tangible goods and services for fathers, mothers, and caregivers with low incomes, to address multigenerational poverty.
The Ohio Fatherhood Commission	Funds fatherhood program grantees in multiple counties across the state to enhance the well-being of Ohio's children. Grantees provide opportunities for fathers to become better parents, partners, and providers.
San Diego Paternal Opportunities Program (POPs)	Operates in Sacramento and San Diego, California, and its mission is to protect family unity through prevention, support, collaboration, and advocacy for paternal, parental, and tribal justice in all branches of the courts through active partnership and best practices.
The RIDGE Project's TYRO Dads Program	Empowers generational responsibility, reduces recidivism, and improves the lives of families in Ohio.

About the study. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation contracted with Mathematica to conduct Key Programmatic Elements of Father Engagement to Promote Self-Sufficiency (KEEP Fathers Engaged). This project aimed to identify key approaches and strategies for engaging fathers across a variety of program areas and subpopulations. From fall 2019 to fall and winter 2020, the key activities of the KEEP Fathers Engaged project included a program scan and targeted literature review to identify a cross-section of programs that actively work to engage fathers to improve children's well-being, strengthen families, and increase their economic mobility. This project also involved key informant discussions with a subset of programs to learn about strategies to engage fathers in programming, and case studies with three programs to delve more deeply into father engagement approaches. A panel of researchers, practitioners, and federal program experts informed all data collection activities.

The approaches described in this practice guide reflect practices that selected programs reported to be effective at developing partnerships in their communities. We did not formally evaluate the impacts of these specific approaches on father and family outcomes as part of this study. The KEEP Fathers Engaged project findings are broadly applicable across human services programs; however, they do not fully address situations in which programs determine additional intervention is needed to support fathers' healthy involvement with their families, such as cases involving family violence. For more information about the study, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/father-engagement>.

ⁱ Martinez, Ken, Frank Rider, Nadia Cayce, Steve Forssell, Jeffrey Poirier, Sharon Hunt, Gerard Crawford, and James Sawyer. "A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care." Washington, DC: Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health, 2013.

ⁱⁱ https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/resource_files/e000002795.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Future of Fatherhood Report." Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019.

^{iv} National Network to End Domestic Violence. "12th Annual Domestic Violence Counts Report." Washington, DC: National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2017. Available at <https://nnedv.org/mdocs-posts/2017-report/>.

^v Breiding, M.J., S.G. Smith, K.C. Basile, M.L. Walters, J. Chen, and M.T. Merrick. "Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization – National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, United States, 2011." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 63, no. 8, 2014, pp. 1–18.

^{vi} Safe and Together Institute. "Becoming Father-Inclusive to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes in Domestic Violence Cases." Canton, OH: Safe & Together Institute and Ohio Intimate Partner Violence Collaborative, 2018. Available at https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/OH_FYLAW_Working-with-Men-as-Parents-Brief_July-2018.pdf.

^{vii} Karberg, E., J. Parekh, M.E. Scott, J.C. Areán, L. Kim, J. Laurore, S. Hanft, et al. "Preventing and Addressing Intimate Violence when Engaging Dads (PAIVED): Challenges, Successes, and Promising Practices from Responsible Fatherhood Programs." OPRE Report #2020-22. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

^{viii} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide." Washington, DC: Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013.