



KEEP Fathers Engaged Practice Brief

Advancing Equity for Fathers in Human Services Systems

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Introduction

Fathers want to be involved in their children's lives, but many human services systems have historically focused on mothers and children, leaving some fathers ignored and even excluded. As a result, some fathers feel distrustful of human services programs, ostracized from human service systems, and stigmatized for needing assistance.^{1,2,3} Additionally, racism, structural inequalities, gender bias, and biases related to multiple intersecting identities (e.g., negative social narratives about men of color) often hinder how well human services programs can support fathers' abilities to reach their full potential and have meaningful involvement in their children's lives. Systemic racism, biased perceptions about fathers and in particular fathers of color, and other structural barriers also impede fathers' ability to engage in human services programs and systems that could enhance the quality of their lives and their involvement in their children's lives.

Fathers (including biological, social, resident, nonresident, and stepfathers) make important contributions to the well-being of children and families.^{4,5,6} As family structures have become increasingly complex, there is a growing interest in developing full-family service models and an increasing need to identify and apply effective father engagement approaches across human services program areas. This brief is part of a larger study, Key Programmatic Elements of Father Engagement to Promote Self Sufficiency (KEEP Fathers Engaged), that aims to identify and describe such approaches and strategies.

Given the particular systemic barriers facing fathers from underserved communities, it is important for human services systems to *proactively* advance equity for fathers to overcome historical and ongoing inequities. By implementing tailored recruitment strategies and making service environments more inclusive of fathers, human services programs can help promote fathers' engagement in services that might lead to improved outcomes for families. This brief reviews four key practices identified by experts from the child welfare, child support, and fatherhood fields (see [Acknowledgements](#)). The practices can help advance equity for fathers across human services systems.

Strategies for advancing equity for fathers in human services programs

- Acknowledge and confront the presence of systemic racism and other structural barriers to equity
 - Develop a father-strong approach that acknowledges and respects how fathers' experiences might influence the type of father they want to be for their children
 - Collect and use data to improve policies and practices
 - Employ culturally responsive and equitable evaluation practices. ▲
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How to use this guide

This practice guide is a resource for human services programs striving to be more inclusive of fathers. This guide draws on literature from the field, interviews with human services programs that serve fathers, and information curated from a webinar on “[Advancing Equity in Fatherhood Programs](#).”⁷ It outlines strategies that programs have used to build an inclusive environment to better engage and meet the needs of fathers. This guide aims to help programs identify strategies for serving fathers more equitably.

This brief uses the following definitions adapted from the “[Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#).”⁸

- **Equity** means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all people, including people who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment. This encompasses people who are Black, Latino, Indigenous, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQI+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.
- **Underserved communities** refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic or geographic communities that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, such as those listed above. ▲

Across varied family structures, multiple factors contribute to positive outcomes in children’s health, well-being, and development, including in families led by mothers or other caregivers with no father involvement. For the purposes of this brief, the discussion centers on those families where at least one father is involved or wants to be involved, and/or where human services systems have an opportunity to facilitate healthy father involvement that improves outcomes for children and for families. This brief (and the KEEP Father Engaged project of which it is part) reflect lessons and examples from a range of human services programs; however, the brief and project do not fully address situations where programs determine additional intervention is needed to facilitate fathers’ healthy involvement with their families, such as cases involving family violence.

Acknowledge and confront biased perceptions about fathers, systemic racism, and other structural barriers to equity

Before human services systems can equitably engage all fathers in services, practitioners and policymakers must recognize the historical context in which fathers might have been negatively impacted by human services systems. When engaging fathers in services, human services programs should consider the experiences of fathers with various backgrounds, including fathers of color, LGBTQI+ fathers, fathers who belong to religious minorities, fathers with disabilities, fathers who live in rural areas, and fathers adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

Equity spotlight

Recognizing how fathers' characteristics influence experiences. In an interview, Joseph Jones of the Center for Urban Families shared that when engaging young fathers, it is important that staff recognize how a father's race, social environment, and age influence the way he experiences his environments and makes decisions, including how he chooses to engage with program services ([KEEP Fathers Engaged Interview with Joseph Jones](#)).⁹ ▲

Steps for acknowledging and confronting systemic racism

Human services programs can take several steps to acknowledge and confront systemic racism that might exist within their organizations and influence their services.

- 1. Understand historical trauma experienced by men of color.** For men of color and some men with differing experiences and identities, issues of fatherhood are rooted in a societal history that has inflicted trauma and wounded several generations. Acknowledging the challenges that these fathers might face and designing services accordingly can enable human services programs to provide services that help fathers overcome trauma. Resources such as the [Tribal Best Practices toolkit](#)¹⁰ offer considerations for engaging families whose present challenges stem from historical trauma. This toolkit recommends the use of a relational worldview model.¹¹ The relational worldview model considers how context (culture, social history, community, and so on), mind (memories, emotions, self-esteem, and so on), body (genetics, substance use, health status, and so on), and spirit (innate and learned experiences that cause good or harm) are interrelated and can lead to imbalances at the individual and family level.
- 2. Consider the extent to which programs might help fathers meet their individual needs but perpetuate inequities.** Consider how human services programs might help some fathers in some ways, while upholding racist or otherwise inequitable systems that are preventing all fathers from accessing human services systems. For example, Leonard Burton, a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Policy, noted that although the child welfare system provides invaluable services to keep children safe, the child welfare system must also recognize (1) the underrepresentation of men and men of color in the child welfare profession can further alienate men and men of color from feeling seen and valued by the system, and (2) the overrepresentation of Black children in foster care suggests that Black communities might experience “wanton surveillance,” which can lead to more trauma among the Black community. In addition, Shaneen Moore, deputy assistant commissioner of the Children and Family Services Administration in Minnesota, explained that despite the antipoverty

“We’re talking about manhood. We’re talking about living in a society that already, when you become bigger than a little boy, it sees you different and with bias and suspicion. We can see it in schools, where we can see the disproportionate number of Black and brown boys that are expelled and suspended, and that begins the denigration and breaking of their spirits of these boys. It begins a process of young boys shutting down, a process of fronting up. A process of hurting and not being able to sleep and not being able to sit still, not being able to pay attention. That begins a process stuck in feelings that can't be released. Thus begins a process not of growing and thriving but one of survival.”

— Jerry Tello,
The National Compadres Network

effects of child support programs for single-parent families, American Indians and African Americans are disproportionately represented among noncustodial parents who have had enforcement actions taken against them because of nonpayment of child support.

- 3. Examine the extent to which staff believe fathers are necessary in the lives of children.** Ask staff to self-reflect and offer training, resources, and other supports to emphasize the important role fathers play and to help address staff's implicit and unconscious biases. Jerry Tello, founder of the Compadres Network and director of training and capacity building, described that when he works with staff who might engage with fathers, he asks staff, "Do you really see these fathers not as scared but as sacred? Do you see them as necessary? Do you see them as blessings for their children?" Tello works with staff to unpack why staff may not see the value of fathers and to shift staff perspectives of the importance of fathers in the lives of their children.
- 4. Seek expert perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion.** Identify experts on diversity, equity, and inclusion and have them work with program leaders and staff to help human services organizations address issues that are rooted in biases and stereotypes. For example, Leonard Burton shared his experience supporting a team of child welfare agency staff for a Breakthrough Series Collaborative that aimed to help child welfare systems better engage fathers and paternal relatives.¹² The improvement teams formed through that Collaborative completed a root cause analysis with child welfare jurisdictions to identify why the jurisdictions were struggling to engage fathers and paternal relatives. This analysis enabled child welfare staff to better understand how their personal biases and institutional and societal biases could be holding them back from successfully engaging fathers. After this activity, child welfare workers began incorporating conversations about fathers during their regular meetings, and supervisors communicated to their staff the value of paternal relatives and the expectation for engaging them.¹³

Apply a father-strong approach to programming

Human services programs that engage fathers must do so with intentionality. Alan-Michael Graves of the Good+ Foundation describes incorporating a father-strong approach into human services programming.

A father-strong approach is based on **acknowledging and respecting how fathers' experiences might influence the type of father they want to be** for their children. As such, a father-strong approach enables men to be the **father that's best for them and their family**—as long as it does not harm their children and legal obligations are met. Further, in implementing this approach, human services programs **aim to proactively help fathers navigate challenging human services systems** or situations.

A father-strong approach also **puts the father, the person with lived experience, at the center of program development and improvement efforts**. Rather than only seeking input from other practitioners or researchers on fatherhood programming, father-strong programs engage current and former program participants or potential program participants and learn from them to inform program

"One of the things that we talk about in an equitable program is—minus a child safety issue—I get to be the father that's best for me and my family. That might mean I'm a father who interacts, takes care, is affectionate, is responsible, is a provider, or is inspirational. I might be one or two of these, or I might be all six. [T]he equity that the program provides me in this programming needs to let me be the father that I am and meet me where I am."

**— Alan-Michael Graves,
The Good+Foundation**

improvements. To understand which aspects of programs are barriers to participation, programs can seek the input of fathers who are eligible for their programs but do not participate. For example, a father-strong program might ask fathers about the amount of time it takes them to travel to a service location or whether they work nights, weekends, or multiple jobs, and might adapt its program schedules based on fathers' recommendations. An organization using a father-strong approach would also go beyond input on scheduling and would ask fathers what types of services or programming would be most valuable to them and adapt their program design accordingly.

Using a father-strong approach also means thinking about **how these factors might vary for fathers with different experiences** or from different communities. For example, programs might:

- Review program materials to ensure they are not enforcing stereotypes.
- Remove references in forms to “mother” and “father” and replace with “Parent 1” or “Parent 2.”
- Require staff to ask for information from both parents or other caregivers rather than assume the mother is the primary contact and leave father fields blank.

A father-strong approach involves **implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives intentionally**. By implementing a lens of cultural inclusion, organizations consider how well human services programs work for various father subpopulations. For example, organizations might explore how a program benefits fathers who are African American, Latino, or Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; fathers who have lower economic stability; fathers in a same-sex relationship; or fathers who are part of other underserved communities that may experience programs differentially.

Collect and use data to improve policies and practices

Human services programs should **consider which data they collect and analyze**, potentially including data **disaggregated** by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age, to help identify inequities in their policies and practices.¹⁴ Importantly, however, when looking to collect new data elements, programs should **ensure the information serves an explicit purpose** and, if possible, communicate that purpose to their participants. Collecting too much data or certain types of data – particularly without a clear, explicit purpose for that data – can turn potential participants away—especially those who have experienced trauma that might be resurfaced by data collection. In addition, it is important to consider **when data are collected** and if fathers must provide detailed personal information before they are able to access services.

“[W]e were able to look at racial differences regarding driver’s license suspension outcomes...[T]here are a lot of automated practices around some of these enforcement tools; however, in many instances, there is caseworker subjectivity that can come into play. And so we want to better understand how does that impact the numbers that we’re seeing.”

— *Shaneen Moore, Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services*

Without considering how and what data they collect as well as why they are collecting it, programs **might unintentionally reinforce inequities**. For example, it is still common in some cases for programs to only collect racial characteristics but not ethnicity data, which can lead to categorizing all Latino or Hispanic populations as White. Without relevant information (including race and ethnicity), programs may struggle to identify the nature and extent of disparities, might miss nuances important to program design and implementation, and might not know where to target quality improvement efforts and when to seek

additional father input. Programs might also be unable to identify the specific needs and strengths of key populations of fathers (e.g., Latino or Hispanic fathers), and unable to monitor the progress of specific types of participants compared with other populations to ensure outcomes are equitable.

As an example of the potential value of disaggregated data, Minnesota's Department of Human Services examined its data with an equity lens and found that Black, Hispanic, and Native American parents, were overrepresented in driver's license suspensions: among child support paying parents eligible for license suspension as of April 2020, the cases of more than half of Black payors (52 percent), Hispanic payors (55 percent), and Native American payors (64 percent) result in a suspended license while only 44 percent of eligible White payors' cases do, with the rest avoiding license suspension through payment agreements or other remedies. Furthermore, the existing data did not enable the child support program to determine whether driver's license suspensions increased compliance with child support. Consequently, there was no way for the Minnesota child support program to know whether using driver's license suspensions as an enforcement tool was causing more harm than good to these populations. Research suggests, however, that noncustodial parents who have had a driver's license suspension experience barriers to finding and keeping work, therefore making it harder to pay ordered support.^{15,16} To better understand why certain populations are overrepresented, the child support program is exploring whether case manager subjectivity plays a role in the use of enforcement tools.

Having good data collection practices **enables organizations to dig deeper and consider how intersectionality influences the fathers they serve**. Intersectionality is the idea that people belong to more than one group and might experience overlapping health and social inequities, as well as overlapping strengths and assets.¹⁷ For example, fathers who are young and fathers with disabilities might each face unique barriers; fathers who are young *and* have a disability might face several types of barriers that compound one another. It is important to **avoid assumptions about the similarities across fathers** served by human services programs. As much as possible, it is **useful to disaggregate data** to consider this intersectionality of experiences. When that is not possible, it is particularly important to **gather qualitative information and hear directly from fathers with lived experience with multiple identities**—thereby reinforcing the importance of using a father-strong approach throughout program design, implementation, and evaluation.

Employ culturally responsive and equitable evaluation practices

Much work remains to advance equity for fathers in human services systems, including the need for additional research on the best strategies. One way to address inequities is to **further examine what works to help fathers with various identities and experiences** access the supports they need to meet their potential.

To understand which program models and strategies best engage and serve fathers, funders might **consider the extent to which using evidence-based curricula supports or hinders advancements in equity**. Though establishing an evidence base of rigorously evaluated program models is important for establishing best practices and standards for scalability, experts suggest that prioritizing evidence-based curricula and program models for funding can inhibit the equitable engagement of all fathers. Experts note that program models might have demonstrated success in one population, but practitioners should be aware that this success **might not translate to other populations**. Moreover, to receive funding, programs are often required to collect copious amounts of personal information about participants. Programs that serve people of color with past traumas may reasonably be hesitant to require their clients to complete a lengthy intake packet that documents every detail about their lives before they can receive

services. Thus, this funding requirement for intensive data collection can result in systematically excluding programs or potential participants in underserved communities.

Using **research methods with an equity lens and culturally informed research practices** can help promote equity in program evaluation. This means that researchers collaborate with the communities they are evaluating and seek their input throughout the evaluation life cycle to inform the research questions of interest, data collection methods, data analysis, reporting, and dissemination of findings.^{18,19,20,21,22} In instances where the communities cannot speak to or are unfamiliar with issues such as unconscious bias or the bias of westernized study methodologies, the input of an experienced evaluator of color can help to promote equity. Table 1 provides a few examples of culturally responsive and equitable evaluation approaches for each stage of the evaluation life cycle.

Table 1. Culturally responsive and equitable evaluation approaches for fatherhood research

Evaluation stage	Culturally responsive and equitable approach
Prepare for the evaluation	Seek input from fathers participating in the program being evaluated
Engage stakeholders	Develop an advisory panel of fathers who represent the communities served by the program
Identify the purpose of the evaluation	Examine how well the program’s principles align with the cultural values of the fathers it serves
Frame the right questions	Prioritize questions that are relevant to fathers participating in or eligible for the program being evaluated
Select and adapt instrumentation	Ensure language and content of instruments are culturally sensitive and use plain language
Collect data	Carefully train data collectors—including fathers—in technical procedures and the cultural context provided by an advisory panel of fathers
Analyze data	Disaggregate data by subgroups and cross-tabulate by important cultural variables identified by an advisory panel of fathers; include analysis of qualitative information to better understand intersectionalities in fathers’ experiences
Disseminate and use results	Create stakeholder review panels of fathers to help expand and enrich interpretation and dissemination of findings

Source: Adapted from Tanisha Tate Woodson’s handout “Using a Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation Approach to Guide Research and Evaluation.”

Conclusion

Engaging fathers in services can lead to improved outcomes for fathers, mothers, and children. However, engaging fathers in human services programs can be challenging, especially due to inequities and systemic barriers facing fathers in human services systems. Therefore, it is important for human services programs to acknowledge these factors and explore ways to combat them, whether it is through developing practices that acknowledge and respect fathers’ lived experiences, using data to inform program improvements, or fostering research practices that can better inform what works when serving fathers from underserved communities. The strategies described in this brief are not exhaustive of what is required to achieve equity in human services programs, but offer considerations for making such programs more equitable and inclusive of fathers.

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About the study

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) 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 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 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 strategies described in this practice guide reflect approaches that selected experts in father engagement reported to be important to advancing equity in human services programming. We did not formally evaluate the impacts of these specific strategies 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 necessary 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>.

Endnotes

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⁸ See the Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>

⁹ See KEEP Fathers Engaged video interview with Joseph Jones: <https://vimeo.com/622579372>

¹⁰ See the Tribal Best Practices Toolkit available at <https://www.nicwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Fam-Engagement-Toolkit-2018.pdf>.

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¹² A Breakthrough Series Collaborative is a short-term (6- to 15-month) learning system that brings together many teams to seek improvement in a focused topic area. Learn more at <http://www.ihl.org/resources/Pages/IHWhitePapers/TheBreakthroughSeriesIHIsCollaborativeModelforAchievingBreakthroughImprovement.aspx>.

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