

Approaches for engaging fathers in child support programs

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Child support payments are associated with increased parent-child engagement, which can lead not only to better academic and social outcomes for children but also to better parent-child and parent-parent relationships.^{5,6,7} Further, child support payments lifted nearly three-quarters of a million families out of poverty in 2017.^{8,9} This fact sheet, which is part of a larger project called KEEP Fathers Engaged, explores three key strategies for child support agencies to engage fathers and improve family stability. KEEP Fathers Engaged focuses on identifying strategies that various human services programs use to engage fathers, with the goal of improving outcomes for children, fathers, and families. You can find more information about this project [here](#)¹⁰.

The child support system serves a wide range of child support-paying parents. This fact sheet specifically looks at fathers who are obligated to pay child support. While the child support system has historically been punitive for fathers who failed to pay child support, the past 20 years have seen growing recognition that this situation often reflects their economic situation, not their unwillingness to support their children (see sidebar).¹¹

With support from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, child support agencies across the country are working to help child support-paying parents – especially fathers – build and maintain strong relationships with their children by connecting fathers to employment services; helping fathers spend more time with their children; considering how much time fathers spend with their children when setting child support orders; and partnering with local fatherhood programs.¹² Child support agencies may use approaches targeted to the varying levels of involvement fathers in the child support system may have with their children. For example, some fathers can pay child support and have strong relationships with their children; whereas others may not have strong relationships with their children, despite consistently paying child support. Moreover, there are fathers who have trouble paying child support because they lack the financial stability to do so. Some of these fathers have good relationships with their children and others do not.

The child support programs highlighted in Exhibit A represent three examples of models that engage fathers. These programs help fathers overcome barriers to child support payment and encourage fathers' greater involvement with their children. For example, all three programs offer fathers access to employment services, which help them find jobs that will enable them to financially support their children, and two programs developed partnerships with the court system to give fathers alternatives to incarceration for nonpayment. Following Exhibit A are three key overarching strategies used across these child support programs to promote father engagement.



Millions of fathers who owe child support live in poverty¹

- Fathers with lower incomes pay a higher proportion of their income in child support than middle-income fathers do²
- Poverty rates among fathers increase once they make child support payments³
- Fathers with lower incomes owe a disproportionate amount of back child support⁴
- Barriers to employment and low-paying jobs make it difficult for some fathers to pay child support, let alone meet their own basic needs

More than any other agency of state government, the child support program has the responsibility and is in a position to reach out to fathers who need supportive services, and to benefit by working cooperatively with fatherhood initiatives that provide these services.--*National Child Support Enforcement Association, Resolution on Fatherhood Initiatives (2000)*.

Exhibit A. Summary of three local child support programs' approaches to engaging fathers

Georgia Division of Child Support Services (DCSS)



- The Georgia Fatherhood program has been active for over 20 years and is the first statewide fatherhood program in the United States. The program works with parents who are unemployed or underemployed and cannot pay their full child support obligation. The program uses community resources and established partnerships to connect parents with resources that lead to jobs paying above minimum wage, greater self-sufficiency, and increased emotional and financial involvement in their children's lives. Services include skills assessment, referrals to GED and Short-Term job training resources, employment referrals, Access and Visitation services, emotional wellness training, and continuous coaching and mentoring.
- The Parental Accountability Court program is a partnership between DCSS and Superior Court Judges to connect noncustodial parents facing incarceration due to nonpayment to resources that will improve their ability to pay child support.



Texas Office of the Attorney General's Child Support Division (CSD)

- The Noncustodial Parents (NCP) Choices program is directed at unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents who are struggling to meet their child support obligations.
- The CSD partners with the Texas Workforce Commission to provide employment services to meet the needs of non-custodial parents in select counties across the state. Additionally, CSD has a long-standing partnership with the Department of Family and Protective Services to assess and recommend various fatherhood related resources to include child support, access and visitation and local fatherhood programming. CSD continues to educate other community and state agency service providers about the role of child support in family well-being.



Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Child Support Enforcement (CSE)

- CSE emphasizes recruiting male staff to improve fathers' communication, trust, and relationships with the child support program.
- The Empowering Fathers Program (EFP), conducts targeted outreach to fathers in the community to build trust in the program. Initially, EFP provided quarterly orientations for noncustodial parents about the child support program. These services have since expanded to include connecting noncustodial fathers to employment resources, improving noncustodial fathers' parenting skills, and building positive relationships between custodial and noncustodial parents.

Focus outreach on the emotional and other nonfinancial contributions fathers make to children's well-being.

Outreach events can be valuable opportunities for programs to publicize their core values. Programs can use these events as opportunities to spread a message that the program can help fathers meet their own needs while still being there for their children. For example, Child Support Enforcement in Mecklenburg County uses outreach events as an opportunity to share with the broader community the message that fathers are an important part of the family and the child support program wants to work with fathers to help them meet their full potential as parents. Outreach events can also explain the purposes of the child support program to the community and thus reduce anxiety from partners about working with the program.

To our [child support] organization, fatherhood engagement is about increasing the number of children being raised with competent, involved, responsible, and committed fathers. Engaged fathers possess the ability to not only provide financial assistance but provide a nurturing environment that focuses on the well-being and needs of the child. —Donald Manns and James Brannon, *Empowering Fathers, Mecklenburg County Child Support Enforcement*

Develop partnerships to help fathers achieve their full potential.

Common barriers to paying child support for fathers are unemployment or underemployment and involvement in the criminal justice system.¹³ Moreover, fathers often report frustration that they are not able to spend time

We started with a focus on helping fathers have a voice and access to their children. —Lorena Sanchez, *Texas Office of the Attorney General*

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with the children they support.¹⁴ Programs can create relationships with other human service providers and systems to meet fathers' needs.

For example, the Georgia DCSS fatherhood program formed several key partnerships to address potential barriers to fathers' involvement in the child support system. Among them are partnerships with (1) employment service providers, including the state Department of Labor and local workforce development agencies, to help fathers access jobs that will enable them to pay child support; and (2) legal assistance providers who can help fathers obtain access and visitation with their children, thus increasing fathers' willingness to pay support. Other partnerships that might help meet fathers' needs are community colleges, departments of corrections, and fatherhood service providers.



Source: Georgia Fatherhood Program, administered by Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS), Division of Child Support Services (DCSS)
Note: Department of Human Services (DHS) Access and Visitation

Use data and evaluation to support sustaining father engagement. Demonstrating program effectiveness is critical to securing funding for programming and for sustaining it over time. Collecting data on program outcomes can inform future program operations as well as create an evidence base that can motivate long-term policy change. While the child support field has been shifting toward a more holistic case management approach to serving the family unit, the purpose of state and local child support programs is, first and foremost, to obtain financial support for children. Demonstrating that engaging fathers in services helps programs collect financial support for children is critical to sustaining this approach. For instance, the Texas CSD has demonstrated that participation in NCP Choices with a focus on supporting fathers as both financial and nonfinancial promoters of their children's well-being has increased child support payments, both in frequency and in amount.¹⁵ A national study also found that NCP Choices improves noncustodial parents' satisfaction with the child support program. Texas CSD continues to test innovative ways to serve noncustodial parents by participating in OCSE-funded studies.¹⁶

About the study. The US 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), a project designed to begin to identify key approaches and strategies for engaging fathers across a variety of program areas and subpopulations. From Fall 2019 through Fall/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; 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. All data collection activities were informed by a panel of researchers, practitioners, and federal program experts.

The approaches described in Fact Sheet reflect practices that selected programs reported to be effective at engaging fathers, and the lessons identified are informed by findings from the KEEP Fathers Engaged project. The impacts of these specific approaches on father and family outcomes were not formally evaluated as part of this study. The KEEP Father Engaged project findings are broadly applicable across human services programs; however, they do not fully address situations where programs determine

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additional intervention is needed to facilitate 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>.

A webinar on how three local child support programs are improving their relationship with fathers and creating father-specific programming, cohosted by Mathematica and the National Child Support Enforcement Association, informs this fact sheet. The fact sheet was developed for the project entitled Key Programmatic Elements of Engaging Fathers to Promote Self-Sufficiency (KEEP Fathers Engaged), sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The authors thank Kiska Dennis-Gear, Angela Williams-Jackson, Lorena Sanchez, Donald Manns, and James Brannon for their participation in the webinar.

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