



# The Power of Fathers

A Concept Paper on Fatherhood,  
Father Engagement,  
and Early Childhood

Harris Professional Development Network  
Fatherhood Engagement Committee  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The benefits of engaging fathers in very young children's lives are generally acknowledged by leaders in the early childhood field, yet there is more work to do to fully include fathers in family-serving programs. Research and practice show that involving fathers supports healthy childhood development and leads to improved outcomes for fathers, children, families, and communities. Yet not all family-serving programs are intentionally and proactively engaging fathers. In an effort to contribute to the conversation about the importance of father engagement in very young children's lives, the Father Engagement Committee of the Harris Professional Development Network (a group of early childhood mental health professionals) developed a concept paper that aims to provide an overview of the empirical and practical evidence that supports father engagement and offer recommendations on how to make father engagement a reality in all family-serving programs. Our hope is that family-serving program staff who read this concept paper gain a greater understanding of why father engagement matters, what it can look like in practice, and how they can strengthen their own program practices and policies when it comes to authentic and meaningful father engagement. While our effort is not exhaustive, we hope that it advances this important conversation.

This concept paper is rooted in social justice and aims to understand fathers and fatherhood within the context of our culture and collective history. First, we acknowledge that “father” and “fatherhood” are socially constructed identities and concepts normalized through socialization and assigned to those deemed to fit within the bounds of male gender identity. Hence, we define fathers as inclusive of all *father figures*, regardless of their sexual identity, gender identity, or sexual orientation. A social justice perspective on fatherhood engagement also means that we think of father engagement within the context of the systems of oppression in which fathers live. To meaningfully engage fathers, it is essential to understand how racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other systems of oppression have intentionally designed a dominant culture where men are not perceived as important or valued caregivers of young children. Furthermore, men that face racial and/or economic injustices are limited in their ability to be active fathers due to systemic barriers.

In Section 1, we offer an overview of the empirical evidence that demonstrates fathers' wide-ranging contributions to children's early development. For example, studies have shown that father engagement during the prenatal period has a positive impact on mothers and is associated with more positive birth outcomes. Research suggests high-

quality father involvement has a strong positive impact on child development indicators such as academic achievement, emotional well-being, and behavior adjustment. Fathers' frequent participation in child-related activities has beneficial effects on children's cognitive, linguistic, and social emotional development. Research also suggests these beneficial effects are bi-directional, deepening fathers' sense of belonging and meaning. Additionally, research suggests that father participation in family strengthening programs may be an important lever that can support father involvement in children's lives, promote overall family participation in program services, positive changes in children's behavior, and increased use of optimal parenting practices.

Section 2 presents program spotlights that offer examples of what father engagement looks like across different populations and contexts. Some of the programs included are specifically focused on fathers (e.g. The DAD Projects, The Dove Tail Project), whereas others have a broader family engagement model, but aim to be inclusive of fathers (e.g. Florida State University Young Parent Project, Fussy Baby Network). Each spotlight provides an overview of the community served by the program, the strategy used to engage fathers, and the outcomes sought by the program. This section provides an opportunity to see a range of examples featuring organizations that have embraced father engagement and strive to strengthen efforts to partner with fathers at the community level.

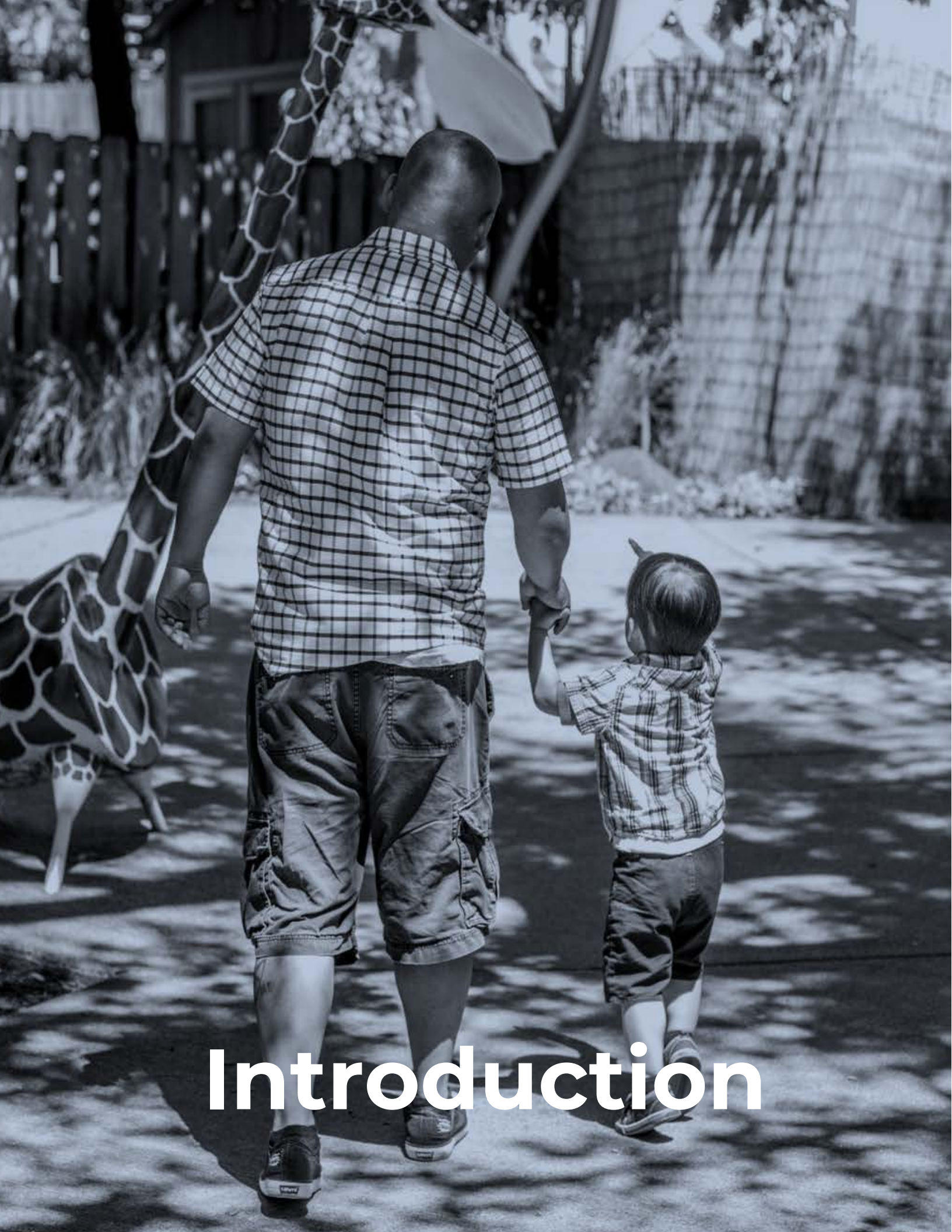
Building on the insights gleaned from research and practice, the concept paper ends with a series of recommendations for strengthening father engagement at the program, policy, and research levels. Family-serving programs interested in strengthening their commitment to father engagement and/or father-friendly services can start by:

- Refreshing their outreach and engagement materials to ensure the use of language, images, and strategies that reflect gender-neutral terms and explicit examples of father/caregiver engagement.
- Articulating a clear commitment to eliminating gender, racial, and class bias.
- Revising program conceptual frameworks and goals to ensure the engagement of males in the child/family system is a priority and value of the organization.
- Eliminating the expectation that mothers are a child's primary caregiver and designing programs that intentionally engage all parents, co-parents, and caregivers.
- Ensuring program policies articulate strategies to engage non-resident male parents/caregivers and promote positive co-parenting relationships as well as strengthened individual parenting.

- Ensuring program curricula are inclusive of evidence-based information and resources.
- Expanding and intensifying supplementary services in fathering/parenting programs to include housing and employment assistance, basic needs assistance, pro-bono or low-cost legal services, and mental health services.

In addition to the programmatic recommendations listed above, Section 3 of the concept paper includes policy and research recommendations that would provide a supportive legislative environment for programmatic change to take hold. This includes elements such as advocating for increased investments in evidence-informed and culturally competent co-parenting programs, and advocating for an overhaul of the systems that impact male participation in their children's lives (e.g. issues regarding incarceration, employment, housing, child support, custody, visitation). Our hope is that this concept paper is an inspiration and catalyst for your program's journey in father engagement. We see it as a living document, and welcome your [feedback, thoughts, and reflections](#).





# Introduction

# INTRODUCTION

## Origins and Goals of the Concept Paper

In March 2019, the Harris Professional Development Network (PDN) Father Engagement Committee began to discuss and imagine a resource that would support programs serving infants and children, and identify key areas for strengthening and building upon their father engagement practices. Committee members wrote this concept paper through examining foundational and emerging research, interviewing programs across the United States, and developing recommendations that can inform programs moving forward. Ultimately, this concept paper is intended to be a roadmap that lays out the terrain of what we know from research and practice; help programs locate where they are in their father engagement work; and inspire programs to begin a journey to strengthen father engagement work.

## About the Authors

The PDN Father Engagement Committee is a working group of infant and early childhood mental health researchers, clinicians/providers, educators, and policymakers. Our work is dedicated to shaping and creating best practices around father engagement in work with infants, children, and families. We are all members of the Harris PDN, a network of 19 multi-disciplinary programs across the United States and in Israel working to advance the infant and early childhood mental health field. To learn more, visit [www.irvingharrisfdn.org/the-harris-pdn/](http://www.irvingharrisfdn.org/the-harris-pdn/).

## Overview of the Concept Paper

It is within the context of engaged, responsive relationships that children understand the world, understand their emotions, learn how to regulate/manage their emotions, and thrive. Often a crucial relationship in a child's life, particularly in the earliest years of life, is their father or father figure. Despite the persistent and damaging mythology of the "absent" father, fathers exist and are present in every community. In fact, in recent years, there has been burgeoning research

highlighting the importance of fathers in the lives and development of their children and vice versa. While the data is clear, there continues to be individual, social, and systemic challenges to fathers' full involvement in the lives of their children. Note, this concept paper does not seek to reinforce dominant-group stereotypes about family structure, or the narrative of there being a father in order to create a strong family; nor does it discount the role that other male-figures, grandparents, kin or felt family plays in the lives of children.

In this paper, we define father broadly to include biological, adoptive, and the wide range of father-figure presences in the lives of children. We acknowledge that "father" and "fatherhood" are socially constructed identities and concepts normalized through socialization and assigned to those deemed to fit within the bounds of male gender identity. In turn, we include in our definition of *father*, all individuals—regardless of their sexual identity, gender identity, or sexual orientation—who define their roles in the lives of their children and families as fathers. The literature around father engagement provides insight more broadly to the importance of multiple caregivers, regardless of gender identity, for children's development. Fathers and other significant caregivers provide additional, different, and complementary relational contexts that expose children to multiple ways to be connected and in relationship. However, the urgency for children and family serving programs and organizations to shift their perspective of fathers as essential caregivers is real. It is indisputable that every child has a father in the most basic biological sense of the role. It is well documented that the presence or absence of fathers can have wide ranging implications to children's developmental trajectory. In addition, the vast number of individuals who identify themselves as male, men, and fathers means that child and family serving programs and organizations must find ways to include and engage fathers in services that support the development of their children.

Research and common practice suggest there are two major barriers to fathers' involvement with their children. First, fathers' relationships with their children is often mediated or moderated by their relationship with the child's mother (Fitzgerald et al., 2014). When this relationship is fraught or fragile, fathers may face greater hurdles to participating fully in their children's lives. Second, challenges



such as fathers not residing with their children, fathers' own beliefs and trauma history, employment and economic instability, substance use and mental health challenges, and a legacy of systemic racist policies and practices, particularly for fathers of color and those living in poverty, can be barriers to involvement in the lives of their children. The intersectionality of race, fatherhood, and socioeconomic status cannot be overstated. The experiences of young fathers 18-24, amplify these barriers as this demographic tends to be represented by men mostly in Black and Latinx communities and men who have low income, fewer supports, and limited access to health and well-being services. Understanding and addressing the unique needs of this group illuminates structural constraints on many fathers. Despite these barriers, this concept paper shows that fathers are not absent; in fact, many want to be in the lives of their children and face obstacles that may compromise loving, nurturing, long-lasting relationships that are important for their children's development.

Fathers may also encounter challenges in identifying—and participating in—father-friendly family strengthening programs. These barriers may include logistical issues such as program hours, fathers' work schedules, and fathers' access to children. There are also provider barriers such as few or no male professional staff, organizational beliefs that father participation is optional, lack of training/expertise in working with fathers, and discomfort/lack of training in facilitating healthy co-parenting relationships. One goal of this paper is to provide family-serving programs with an opportunity to see a range of examples featuring organizations that have embraced father engagement and strive to strengthen efforts to partner with fathers at the community level.

This paper is designed to provide a brief overview of the research supporting fathers' wide-ranging contributions to healthy child development. It also shines a spotlight on innovative father engagement programs that address systemic and personal barriers. The spotlights include programs and organizations working with fathers across the United States. Finally, this paper closes with program, policy, and research recommendations to advance fathers as key stakeholders in family-strengthening programming and to support the full participation of fathers in their families and communities. Throughout this paper, we include quotes from

interviews conducted by Dr. Clinton Boyd in conjunction with the Florida State University (FSU) Young Parent Project (see Program Spotlight on page 44). We included these quotes to remind the reader, and ourselves, of the love and resilience that fathers already bring to their children's' lives.

### **A Word About Social Justice and Equity**

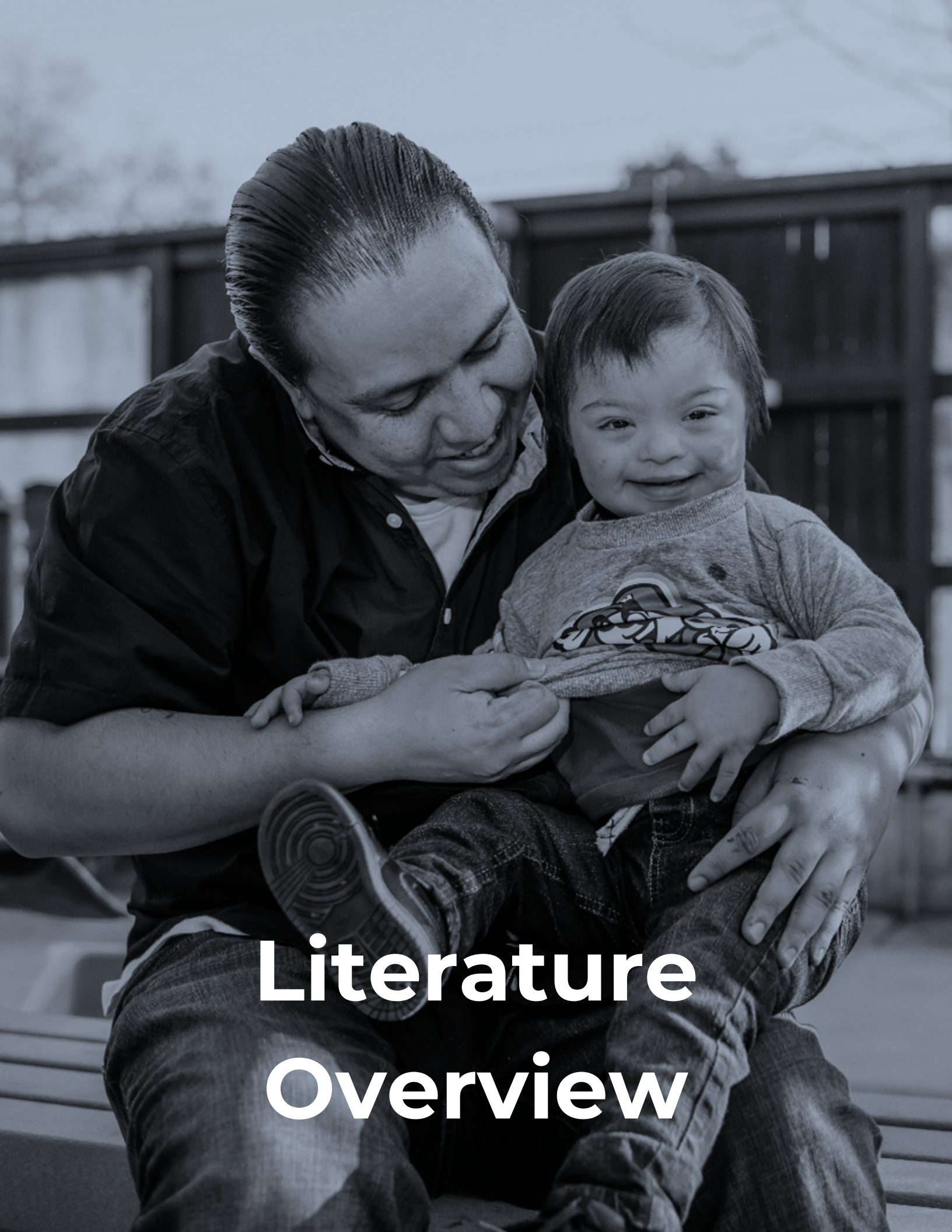
We firmly believe that a vision of a just future where fathers are recognized, supported, and honored as caretakers must be rooted in a social justice perspective. It is critical to be rigorous when it comes to understanding how white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, and other systems of oppression have intentionally designed a dominant culture where men are not taken seriously as caregivers; where men that face racial and/or economic injustice are limited in their ability to be caretakers due to systemic barriers; and where men are often socialized to value status, aggression, and emotional repression (Clemens, 2017). This is the same dominant culture that financially and socially undervalues work done by women and people of color (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2019); makes invisible the ways that caregiving is disproportionately done by women (especially women of color and immigrants) (Feliciano & Segal, 2018); enforces the legitimacy of heterosexual nuclear families; uses the child welfare system and criminal legal system to criminalize, surveil, and

**“[The most] important [part of] being a father is staying out here and making sure you be there for the child. If you have a child and you’re doing something wrong, then you get into a situation you can’t get out of, like get locked up or something for a couple years, how you gonna be there for your child? You don’t want your child to grow up without you for a couple years because you’re locked up. Just meeting her when she’s five years old is not a good experience. That’s bad for the kids and bad for the man. You failed your mission. I’m not trying to fail my mission.”**

*Fatherhood Interview,  
FSU Young Parents Project*

separate families of color (Meyerson, 2018); and is built upon the United States' legacy of enslavement and genocide.

Creating a world where fathers are prepared to be and are recognized as key caregivers means that we also have to create a world where everyone can thrive; a world where a person's socioeconomic status does not dictate the time they spend with their family; a world where there is no one way to embody and express your gender; a world where there is no right family constellation; a world where we can tell the truth about genocide, enslavement, and oppression to ensure that its underlying mechanisms do not inform our policies, systems, and practices; and a world where tenderness, care, and interdependence are valued. Freeing men of the constraints that limit their ability to parent or give care requires freeing everyone. We hope we can do this with you and that this paper provides a start to this work.



# Literature Overview



# LITERATURE OVERVIEW

*The section provides a brief overview of the empirical evidence that demonstrates fathers' wide-ranging contributions to child development. It is not meant to be an exhaustive literature review on father engagement; rather, it is intended to be a brief introduction to the research that underpins the importance of fathers in their children's' lives.*

## **The Impact of Fathers on Their Children's Development**

### *Impacts in the Prenatal Period and Early Infancy*

Fathers begin making a positive impact on their children's lives even before they are born. Paternal involvement during pregnancy increases the likelihood that mothers will maintain or adopt healthy pregnancy behaviors (e.g. seeking prenatal care, reducing/eliminating drinking, drug use and smoking), as well as reduces the risk of preterm birth, low birth weight, fetal growth restriction, and infant mortality up to one year after birth (Mincy, 2015; Teitler, 2001). Of note, these effects—e.g. early prenatal care rates—are highest for married mothers, followed by those cohabiting, and lowest for mothers in romantic but non-cohabiting relationships (Teitler, 2001).

In terms of equity, father involvement is associated with substantial reductions in racial disparities in infant mortality between Black and white pregnant women; in addition, one study found that 60 to 75 percent of excess mortality among Black women could be prevented with increased paternal involvement (Alio et al., 2011). This growing evidence provides ample motivation to design prenatal family programs that involve both parents and is a call to action for more intention around engaging with fathers in prenatal care settings. For example, a recent study (Albuja et al., 2019) found that fairly small changes (e.g., environmental cues that represent men and fatherhood) in the prenatal care setting positively influenced expectant fathers' parenting confidence, comfort, and intention to learn about the pregnancy and engage in healthy habits. Prenatal involvement and residence at birth are the

strongest predictors of paternal involvement by the time a child reaches 5 years (Shannon et al., 2009).

Fathers, like mothers, experience a rise in the hormone prolactin around the time of their baby's birth; elevated prolactin levels in new fathers likely "contribute to child-caring behavior and facilitate behavioral and emotional states attributed to child care" (Hashemian, 2016, p. 182). Once the baby is born, family formation is a sensitive (and transformative) time as fathers begin the process of "falling in love" with their infant. This transition is characterized by more integrated functioning of two areas of the brain: one implicated in emotional processing and the other involved in social understanding, which researchers described as a "parental caregiving" neural network (Abraham et al., 2014). However, this period is not without its challenges, as fathers must master new parenting skills; integrate elements of a new "father" identity, adjust to new financial commitments, and manage changes and stressors related to the co-parenting relationship (Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, & Diamond, 2012). At this stage, fathers who do not live with, or have romantic relationships with their child's mother, are at high risk for limited participation in their child's life (Carlson et al., 2008).

The demands associated with the transition to parenthood can increase fathers' risk and vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and depression (Rowe, Holton and Fisher, 2013). A meta-analysis of paternal perinatal depression reported prevalence rates between 2 percent and 25 percent, with paternal distress typically highest in the first postpartum year (Giallo et al., 2014). Furthermore, fathers whose female partners are experiencing depression are at increased risk to experience depression themselves; among this group, the prevalence of paternal perinatal depression is estimated at rates up to 50 percent (Yogman et al., 2016). Maternal depression screening is endorsed by several independent expert medical panels including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the United States Preventive Services Task Force (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2016), and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2016). There are currently no similar recommendations in place for paternal perinatal depression screening, though there are increasing calls for depression screening efforts to focus on fathers as well to reduce the risks

associated with untreated and unrecognized paternal depression on fathers, children, and families (Walsh, Davis, & Garfield, 2020).

### *Impacts on Father-Child Attachment*

High-quality, involved fathering has strong, positive impacts on children's development, including academic achievement, emotional well-being, and behavioral adjustment (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013), and these associations can be found for both resident and nonresident father involvement (Adamsons, 2018). Research evidence indicates that fathers' more frequent participation in child-related activities has significant beneficial effects on children's cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional development across early childhood independent of mothers' involvement or household financial resources (McMunn, et al., 2017). It is important to note that quantity of father-child contact *alone* does not predict child adjustment or well-being (Dale, 2018). Secure attachment is the culmination of both quantity *and* quality of fathering over time (Brown et. al, 2012). Father involvement and paternal sensitivity predicted father-child attachment security at age 3, and attachment security predicted increased paternal sensitivity over time (Brown et. al, 2012). In this way, early involvement positions a family for ongoing connection and engagement, with research demonstrating that more father involvement at age 1 was associated with child reports of better father-child relationships at age 9 (Jessee & Adamsons, 2018). Furthermore, there is some evidence that these patterns of father involvement are passed through generations, so programs that work to support high quality father-child relationships may be promoting stronger families for years to come (ibid). Additionally, these positive impacts are bidirectional; shaping not just the child but the father as well, deepening a father's sense of belonging and meaning (Berkman et al., 2000).

**“[Being a father means] spending time. Time is pretty much the most important thing to me. Being there. If I couldn't be there – that's a problem. I wanna be there.”**

*Fatherhood Interview, FSU  
Young Parents Project*

Barriers to father involvement often include family systems issues, most importantly, the relationship between father and mother. Fathers' involvement during the newborn period is strongly associated with marital status (Yogman et al., 2016). While unmarried couples are often cohabitating at the time of the child's birth, recent studies show that 63 percent of unmarried fathers are no longer living with the mother and their child after 5 years (Carlson et al., 2008), and have less contact and involvement with their children than resident fathers do (Cheadle et al., 2018). Furthermore, once a couple ends their romantic relationship, nonmarital father involvement tends to drop sharply, especially when each partner establishes new romantic relationships and/or has children with those partners (Edin et al., 2009). While acknowledging these data, it is critical to avoid assumptions about paternal engagement: recent work shows that nonresident father involvement can follow several different trajectories, including remaining stable and, in some cases, even increasing (Cheadle et al., 2018).

#### *Impacts on Social-Emotional Development*

Starting in infancy, fathers' brains are sensitive and responsive to early caregiving experiences, with primary caregiving fathers showing similar patterns of amygdala activation to primary caregiving mothers (Abraham et al., 2014). Consistent biological father presence is associated with toddlers' regulatory development across toddlerhood (Bocknek et al., 2014), and fathers' supportiveness is positively associated with children's emotional regulation at 24 months (Cabrera et al., 2007).

In terms of relationship-building, research indicates that infants are equally responsive to mothers and fathers (Kochanska & Aksan, 2004). Research has found that a secure father-child attachment relationship is related to both the degree of father involvement and the sensitivity of fathering behavior; father-child attachment remains relatively stable across early childhood and predicts increased paternal sensitivity over time (Brown et al., 2012). In terms of developmental benefits to the child, father-child attachment security plays a role in a range of child outcomes. Securely attached children show stronger emotional regulation and coping skills (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2017), less engagement in high risk behaviors and fewer mental health problems (Moretti & Peled, 2004), greater sociability



(Thompson & Lamb, 1983; Lamb et al., 1982), and more reciprocated friendships (Veríssimo, 2011) than children in insecure relationships. Overall, the quality of the infant-parent attachment is a powerful predictor of a child's later social and emotional outcome and a secure attachment is a “protective factor against social and emotional maladjustment” for infants and children (Benoit, 2004).

A large-scale meta-analysis found a significant effect between active father involvement and positive social-emotional outcomes. Studies suggest that fathers' engagement positively impacts their children's social competence (Leidy et al., 2013), children's later IQ (Nettle, 2008), and other learning outcomes (McWayne, 2013). Over the long-term, paternal engagement is also related to decreases in boys' negative social behavior (e.g., delinquency) and girls' psychological problems in early adulthood (Sarkadi, 2008).

**“[The best part of being a father is] getting to see the kids grow. Watching 'em go from a newborn baby to a moving-around-too-much toddler!”**

*Fatherhood Interview,  
FSU Young Parents Project*

### *Impacts on Cognition and Language Development*

Fathers' supportiveness of the child is positively associated with children's language and cognitive development across the early years (i.e. 24 to 64 months) (Cabrera et al., 2007). In addition, paternal supportiveness and sensitivity during play interactions at 24 months predicted cognitive development and vocabulary at 36 months (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). Further, fathers' vocabulary use in a shared-reading session with their infants at 6 months of age predicted children's language development at 15 and 36 months old (Malin et al., 2014; Pancsofar et al., 2010).

Over the long-term, fathers' use of warm and stimulating parenting practices predicted enhanced reading and math skills for children in middle childhood, whereas fathers' use of restrictive/punitive discipline predicted lower reading and math skills. Associations between fathers' parenting and children's cognitive skills

were similar across both resident and nonresident fathers and across African American and Hispanic families (Coley et al., 2011).

### *Impact of Coparenting Relationships*

A positive coparenting relationship with the child's mother is associated with the quantity and quality of father involvement (Palkovitz and Hull, 2013; Hohmann-Marriott, 2011). When mothers encourage fathers' relationships with children, fathers see children more, engage with them more, and have more positive relationships with them (Waller, 2012; Carlson et al., 2008). This dynamic extends to father involvement in their children's health care as well, which appears to be largely moderated by maternal behavior. When mothers were more encouraging of fathers' involvement in childrearing, fathers felt more influential in child health-related decision-making (Zvara et al., 2013). Furthermore, fathers were more directly engaged in their children's health care when mothers held more nontraditional beliefs about gender roles (ibid).

The relationship status of parents also influences father involvement. In families where fathers and mothers share a romantic relationship, fathers are likely to have higher quality involvement with their children than fathers who have no relationship with their children's mothers (McLanahan and Beck, 2010).

Furthermore, economic stability and father engagement interact in complex ways within the family system. Specifically, "child support arrears can reduce fathers' willingness or ability to engage with their children and the consequences of child support debt can inhibit fathers' ability to spend time with their children and to regain economic stability"(Child and Family Research Partnership, 2018). Taking a social justice lens, data indicates that child support enforcement policies disproportionately affect "black, low-income and noncustodial fathers and negatively impact their children" (Pratt, 2016).

### *Impact of Father Participation in Family Strengthening Programs and Services*

Father participation in family strengthening programs may also be an important lever that can support father involvement in children's lives and promote overall family participation in program services. A study of father involvement in home visiting found that when fathers regularly participated in home visits, they were more likely to remain emotionally involved with the child at the six-month study follow-up, and families were more than four times as likely to be retained in the program (McGinnis et al., 2019). However, the *intentional* addition of fathers to home visiting curricula is often a missing link. One example of a program addressing this gap is the "Dads Matter" enhancement (designed to incorporate fathers into perinatal home visiting services). Pilot testing of Dads Matter established positive trends associated with the quality of the mother-father relationship, perceived parental stress, father involvement with the child, maltreatment indicators, and fathers' verbalizations toward the infant (Guterman, Bellamy & Banman, 2018). Father involvement in program services may also have academic benefits. In a Head Start-based father-child intervention, children of fathers with greater participation showed higher mathematics readiness change scores and their fathers showed more involvement with children post-treatment.

Father involvement in permanency planning (child welfare) is also beneficial, as when fathers are involved, their children have shorter stays in foster care and are more likely to be reunited with birth parents or placed with relatives after foster care (as compared to non-relative placements) (Coakley, 2013).

In a meta-analysis, parent education intervention studies that included fathers, compared with those that did not, cited significantly more positive changes in children's behaviors and an increased use of optimal parenting practices (Lundahl et al. 2008). That said, fathers also reported fewer desirable gains from these programs, which suggests that parent education interventions may require review/modification to better align with the needs of fathers (ibid). In fact, lessons learned from recent fatherhood engagement interventions suggest that programs must first meet and address fathers' tangible and psychological needs before shifting to messaging. A second, and critical, success factor to support relationship-building and trust is recognizing the cultures of fathers being served—and selecting staff who represent these cultures as leaders (Mogro-Wilson, & Hartford, 2017). Analysis

from Pfitzner, Humphreys and Hegarty (2020) finds that single-gender groups supported father engagement by providing a “context where men could form intimate connections with other fathers and talk openly about their parenting experiences without fear of criticism from partners” (Pfitzner, Humphreys, & Hegarty, 2020).

Research shows that one initial motivation of fathers when participating in program services is a desire to enhance their relationship with their child's mother/their coparent (Alamillo & Zaveri, 2018). Growing evidence indicates that co-parent programs may be more effective than father-only programs, though each offer distinct advantages: “...while father only programs contribute to increased father involvement and parenting effectiveness, when both parents [are] involved, family based programs [are] most successful” (Pruett, Pruett, Cowan, & Cowan, 2017b in Lechowicz, 2018). Also, one important potential limitation of father-only programs is that positive behavior changes and learning is rarely generalized to non-participating mothers (Lechowicz et al, 2018). Considering how best to engage and involve *both* parents in program services may lead to greater benefits to the family system overall.

## **In Summary**

Studies show the profound impact of father involvement on children's early development, including positive impacts on the social-emotional, cognitive, and communication domains. Addressing logistical, policy, and institutional barriers to men's involvement in their families and in family-strengthening programs is critical to maximizing young children's potential and to build strong, sustaining family systems. Research evidence related to the *Supporting Father Involvement* program indicates that with intentional outreach and inclusion of fathers in co-parenting programs, couple conflict can be reduced, and child outcomes can be improved. By increasing father engagement in their children's lives, communities can enhance the lives of all family members.

There are also limitations to the research available on fatherhood engagement. While there has been increasing attention in research to the role and



developmental influences of fathers, the committee acknowledges the emerging, but limited, literature rooted in social justice that challenges the current conception and definition of fathers and fatherhood. From our perspective, a research agenda rooted in social justice would center the contributions and experiences of fathers from the full range of diversity of race, ethnicity, class, and geographic location within research designs and methodologies. For example, we would advocate for more research about the contributions and experiences of fathers of colors, fathers in the South, and fathers in rural areas. Research that is rooted in social justice should also be inclusive of fathers in family constellations beyond families with two heterosexual, cis-gender parents such as single fathers, gay fathers, transgendered fathers, male-identified extended family, nonbiological fathers, and other father-figures.



# Program Spotlights

# PROGRAM SPOTLIGHTS

As indicated in the introduction, this section consists of seven spotlights of programs and organizations that are working with fathers in California, Washington State, Florida, New Mexico, and Chicago. The program spotlights below were recommended by members of the PDN Fatherhood Engagement Committee. They are not intended to be an exhaustive collection of the important work being done across the US. There are many other programs and organizations that could be highlighted, and we hope to connect with more of them as our work continues.

For each spotlight, committee members conducted an interview with a leader of the program/organization using an interview guide to ensure consistent information was gathered for each program/organization. As such, each spotlight provides an overview of the following:

- Communities served
- Organizational context
- Models and/or strategies used
- Father engagement stance and learnings
- Desired outcomes
- Recommendations for culture/systems/policy change

Each program/organization enters and frames their father engagement work in very different ways. Some began their work with the aim of serving and working with fathers while others had a broader focus in their family engagement model/strategy. We have attempted to order the spotlights along a continuum beginning with programs that are focused specifically on fathers to those that strive to be inclusive of fathers. By offering this selection of programs/organizations, our hope is that the spotlights affirm the work you are currently doing and offer inspiration for future, more inclusive work.

## PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT THE DAD PROJECTS



# DAD Projects

### Program Description

The Dads and Development (DAD) Projects aim to promote the relationship between fathers and infants through providing safe, contained venues for fathers to interact with infants while giving mothers a few hours to focus on their own self-care in the Seattle-Tacoma, Washington area.

The DAD Projects provide a variety of services including home visits, breastfeeding support, newborn behavioral observation, tummy time guidance, developmental screenings, Fussy Baby support, feeding/sleeping consultation, postpartum screenings, and care coordination.

#### Just the Basics

- Location: Seattle, King County, and Tacoma, Pierce County, Washington
- Services: home visits, screenings, observations support groups
- For: fathers and their infants

### Communities Served

The DAD Projects is open to all fathers and infants. The DAD Projects serves Seattle, Washington and is now branching out to Tacoma/Pierce County by way of the Strengthening Families Washington program within the Department of Children, Youth, and Families. The program specifically targets fathers that participated in DAD Projects services. Prenatal class and personal referrals from fathers also bring new participants to the program. The program developed a partnership with the Tacoma Urban League to expand recruitment offers to diversify the participants. Each group averages six to seven fathers with an ideal range of eight to ten fathers.

Currently, the majority of the program's participants are from middle-class families and are local to the Seattle-based services. The fathers have been predominantly White and middle-class. In terms of fathers of color, there are more Asian fathers than Latinx or African American fathers engaged.



## **Organizational Context**

The DAD Projects has one staff member, founder Nicholas Kasovac, MA, R-DMT, IMH-E(II). It is a contracted program funded by Swedish Hospital and all its classes and programs are funded by the hospital. The program currently rents space and offers classes for fathers to pay-out-of-pocket.

## **Program Models and Strategies**

The DAD Projects offers an eight-week class that consists of one two-hour session per week. Fathers must attend these classes with their infants or toddlers. These classes allow fathers to form connections with both their infants and each other. Each session has a pre-set agenda and includes the following activities:

- Introduction activity at the beginning of the session. Fathers share observations/reflections from their homework and the group assesses what is shared and discuss what to look for next time.
- Open forum for questions or issues that have come up.
- Exploration of a domain of development (one per session) that covers specific features, concepts, and frameworks. Ideas and concepts are presented as metaphors to be applied to child development or co-parenting to encourage understanding and relatability.
- Application of the chaos theory through discussing a behavior the fathers notice and exploring its underlying pattern.

The program is grounded in, and guided by, several strategies:

- Emphasizing relationship with baby, facilitating, and fostering that relationship in vivo, not just for the dad but for other dads in group.
- Affirming fathers on their fathering.
- Fathers asking one another first before asking the facilitator.

## **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

The DAD Projects focuses on the father-infant relationship and creates a holding environment for fathers to try new things they may be uncertain about. The program understands that fathers are growing and developing a sense of



themselves just as their children are developing. It is uncommon for fathers to participate in a cultural transition to fatherhood, as cultural myths often leave fathers to navigate fatherhood on their own. The media representation and cultural trends that exist in relationship to fatherhood usually center around father engagement with older children. The program is also grounded in attachment theory by beginning with the infants and working backwards asking, “What about the fathers?”

### **Desired Outcomes**

The Dad Projects aims to advance the following outcomes:

- Increase fathers' knowledge in child development; increase confidence and competence in fathering
- Affirm what participants do as fathers (e.g. providing positive feedback)
- Improve co-parenting communication
- Develop social connections with other fathers
- Feel supported in fathering role

### **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

The DAD Projects aspires to address and transform the ways fathers are left out of day-to-day society and culture. Fathers are often expected to do more in caretaking and co-parenting but are not always supported or taught what they need. The DAD Projects hopes to create a future where all fathers receive adequate supports, experiences, and opportunities to learn and develop a relationship with their children.

# CONSCIOUS FATHERING PROGRAM OF SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO



## Program Description

The Conscious Fathering (CF) Program is a hands-on class that prepares fathers for taking care of their newborn baby. This class is for fathers with newborns and expecting fathers of babies in the second or third trimester. This is a three-hour class that covers topics such as how to hold your baby, feeding, cleaning, comforting, and how to identify baby's basic needs. This is a class for fathers and is taught by fathers.

### Just the Basics

- Location: southern New Mexico
- Services: hands-on class
- For: fathers with newborns or expecting fathers of babies in the second or third trimester

## Communities Served

Conscious Fathering (CF) Program is located within seven counties in southern New Mexico and offers services to primarily rural communities with populations of 10,000 or less. From the families that CF serves, the majority are Hispanic/Latinx. CF operates from the belief that within the Hispanic/Latinx communities they serve, mothers and grandmothers care for children, and this is not a shared responsibility by the father or male guardians. CF networks with many agencies and private entities to build awareness and offer supports for families. These entities include hospitals, pregnancy centers, faith-based centers, community resource centers, high schools, higher education establishments, grassroots nonprofits, and child/family-based government agencies.

## Organizational Context

CF is a grant program housed by the Aprendamos Intervention Team. The primary funding is provided by the Children's Trust Fund. Their scope of work is to introduce and establish self-sustaining CF classes in nine counties using volunteers and MOUs with local entities (i.e., hospital education programs, CYFD, etc.). CF has two

full-time employees and currently has three volunteers in Dona Ana County and Sierra County.

The program is completing its third year. In FY16, the program was primarily in Dona Ana County with classes only offered in Las Cruces. The numbers in FY16 totaled 26 participants. In FY19, classes saw 97 participants with a referral count of 132.

### **Program Model and Strategies**

CF began using the “Conscious Fathering” model licensed from [Parent Trust for Washington Children](#). The model served new and expectant fathers on the basic skills and care for newborns and infants. In FY19, the program expanded to offer the “[Fathering in 15](#)” model to offer greater support to fathers/male guardians with older children. In FY19, to incentivize the program, CF became a distribution site for car seats with [SaferNM](#). The addition of ‘Fathering in 15’ and the car seat distribution program has increased FY20/Q2 referral rates by 35 percent in comparison to FY19.

The primary strategies CF uses to obtain referrals and increase class retention are to create a new culture around parenting and promoting fatherhood. CF promotes the services for walk-in (voluntary) and mandated participants. CF also engages in work to shift narratives around fathers and fatherhood. They are working with the local government and state to change the imagery of fatherhood. They also utilize social media routinely to build awareness of their services and to share stories and resources. Through demographic targeting, the program can more consistently reach out to communities.

### **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

CF is both father-friendly and father-centered. The program provides services in both group settings and in-home to engage fathers where they are. All programs are for men only to encourage participants to ask questions that they were embarrassed to ask their partners or co-parent. The group setting of the program provides the opportunity for men to ask questions, learn of community supports, and the opportunity to meet other fathers, all of which create healthier conversations and community.

The idea of being father-friendly/father-centered focus is crucial to CF. Fatherhood education is still conceptually new to the communities CF works with. In New Mexico, the culture is primarily focused on the mother and child, and fathers are seen as the secondary caregiver. Through community action, CF is bringing attention to how inviting providers are to fathers in terms of their documentation, forms, assessments, and images used in their materials.

### **Desired Outcomes**

CF's desired outcome is to create a new culture around parenthood and seeing parenting as a dual-role caregiving family. They aim to do this through:

- Utilizing program data to create legislative change in New Mexico.
- Providing current program resources and expanding services to fathers/male guardians through community MOUs and collaborations.
- Removing the stigma that “dads won’t engage” and normalizing that dads are equally important as moms and providing them the education and resources to be the best father they can be to their child(ren).

### **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

CF believes that the key to healthy families is to normalize conversations that fathers can have and encourage them to become scholarly fathers. With minimal to no services supporting fathers, legislative action needs to occur.

## PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

# THE DOVETAIL PROJECT



### Program Description

The Dovetail Project provides young Black fathers with the skills and support they need to play a significant role in raising their children. Through a curriculum focused on parenting, life, and job skills, the Dovetail Project teaches fathers about what it means to be a father and helps them address the systemic barriers that keep them away from their children (e.g. share information on felony street law, help fathers navigate the criminal justice system, help fathers obtain job skills so they can remain an active presence over the course of their children's lives).

#### Just the Basics

- Location: Chicago, Illinois
- Services: three-month curriculum including content on parenting, life, and job skills; support with GED attainment and employment
- For: young African American fathers and expectant fathers

### Communities Served

Dovetail works on the ground, in the streets, parks, barber shops, and in the community. It works with fathers who have not obtained a GED or high school diploma and are un- or under-employed. Ninety-eight percent of Dovetail's fathers are African American or Black, and two percent are Latinx.

### Program Model and Strategies

Dovetail facilitates small cohorts of young African American fathers and expectant fathers, ages 17 to 24, to immerse themselves for three months in an intensive curriculum of parenting skills, life skills, job skills, and felony street law. Fathers meet for one three-hour session per week for 12-weeks with a skilled facilitator and guest speakers. The curriculum teaches its participants:



- How to be present - through felony street law education which helps them avoid incarceration and stay in their children's lives;
- how to be a provider - through financial literacy and job interview preparation; and
- how to be a parent - through basic and individualized parenting skills.

Beyond the curriculum, the fathers receive holistic support from Dovetail's case managers to support fathers' participation in the economy by enrolling in a GED or trade program, and/or receiving job training through one of Dovetail's partner employers. Participants are honored with a graduation ceremony at the program's end. With participation in the Dovetail Project's curriculum, children then have a stronger sense of self, purpose, and belonging, because their father is actively engaged and invested in their well-being. Dovetail graduates more than 120 fathers per year. Upon graduation, 100 percent of the fathers are seeking their high school diploma or its equivalent and/or a job.

### **Organizational Context**

Dovetail was founded in 2009 by Sheldon Smith. Determined to be the best father he could be for his daughter, Jada, he founded The Dovetail Project to bring together resources he found lacking in his own life and the lives of other young fathers in Chicago's communities. The organization currently works across three campuses in Chicago and has a staff of ten. Dovetail partners with local industry, nonprofit organizations, and the criminal justice system to ensure that its fathers have access to resources they need to support their children.

### **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

Dovetail recruits its participants by sending a team consisting mostly of Dovetail alumni into communities around Chicago to recruit men they meet at the bus stop, in barber shops, and on the corner. They strike up conversations with young men on the street, asking if they're fathers and inviting them to Dovetail. To help fathers participate in their programs, fathers receive a bus pass, meals, and a completion stipend to celebrate their full engagement in the program.

The program both serves and is run by African American fathers from the same communities. The program's exclusive curriculum was developed through a synthesis of outside research and internal community expertise, based on founder Sheldon Smith's quest for resources when he became a young father. The program continuously develops community leaders by training and employing Dovetail graduates as recruiters, interns, and staff members. More than 500 Chicago fathers have graduated from Dovetail Fatherhood Training Class. Dovetail believes they are “working with a baby to save a baby”.

### **Desired Outcomes**

Dovetail hopes to break down cultural and systemic barriers to father involvement in the lives of their young children. The project is working to change the way society looks at fathers, by helping fathers access educational and job opportunities that would help them solidify their role in the lives of their children. Dovetail is working to be sure that fathers, especially young fathers, are heard and seen for their role. The Dovetail Project has built a relationship with the University of Chicago and is currently going through a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT).

### **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

As Dovetail achieves its ten-year anniversary, the project will consider how it can continue to foster systems change to ensure that its fathers have access to opportunities so they can help better the lives of their children. In the coming years, Dovetail hopes to support data gathering efforts to gain a true understanding of the number of fathers enrolled in Chicago Public Schools so that services can be provided. Dovetail also hopes to celebrate father involvement and stop punitive practices against poor fathers by seeking to reform the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and other systemic efforts that shape how fathers are involved in their children's lives.

## PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

# ALAMEDA COUNTY FATHERS CORPS



### Program Description

The Alameda County Fathers Corps (ACFC), established in 2013, is a collaborative effort of First 5 Alameda County, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency, and Alameda County Social Services Agency. The overarching goal of ACFC is for every father to be fully engaged and supportive of their children and that agencies and organizations in Alameda County in California are fully prepared to help fathers and families succeed.

#### Just the Basics

- Location: Alameda County, California
- Services: learning community, technical assistance, photo bank curation
- For: fathers and service providers

### Communities Served

ACFC is a county-wide team of male service providers in different levels of training, working to help strengthen families by helping men be the best fathers they can be. In addition, ACFC promotes and assists with the implementation of the Alameda County Fathers Corps Father-Friendly Principles throughout Alameda County.

### Program Model and Strategies

Every year, ACFC provides ten trainings on a range of topics such as fathers' roles in supporting child development, trauma's impact on brain development, and parental rights and responsibilities. These trainings are typically open to ACFC's Father Friendly Provider Network, which is open to all service providers, with the goal of increasing the capacity of providers to effectively support and engage fathers and father-figures.

ACFC's Fathers Corps Learning Community for male service providers provides a space for men to focus on building their capacity in early childhood and fatherhood support and advocacy, to network, and to support each other in their work. During the year, specific trainings are only open to the learning community and there is a one-hour session after each training for only the learning community. ACFC also

organizes an annual retreat for the learning community that addresses masculinity and self-awareness.

ACFC's Fatherhood Partnership (FP) aims to build the capacity of agencies to offer father-specific parenting education and support groups throughout Alameda County. FP provides an intensive nine-month capacity-building training series using the World Café training model to enhance staff's ability to offer father-specific support groups by focusing on the following:

- Tools and strategies to manage logistics to create and launch father-specific services, conduct outreach to fathers, and facilitate small group discussions with fathers on fatherhood topics.
- The importance of communicating the unique and critical role fathers play in the optimal development of their children.
- Strategies for implementing the Father Friendly Principles.

Participating agencies must identify two to three staff to participate in the FP. During the program, these staff members will attend trainings and will receive technical assistance so they can design and implement (i.e. facilitate, supervise) a father-specific parenting education/support group in their agency.

Lastly, the Alameda County Fathers Corps Digital Photo Bank was developed to curate downloadable images of fathers. Too often fathers are not represented in the images we see promoting families. Diverse images of fathers and children are now available for download and use on websites and in collateral materials. These fatherhood images are accessible free of cost at [www.diversityoffatherhood.com/](http://www.diversityoffatherhood.com/).

### **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

ACFC's work is grounded in their Father-Friendly Principles, which they recommend be implemented in service organizations county-wide:

- **Principle 1:** That fathers, and the needs of fathers, be included in the structure and delivery model of all family services in Alameda County agencies and organizations.

- **Principle 2:** That Alameda County programs, agencies, and organizations be open, supportive, helpful, and inclusive towards the needs of fathers and provide father-specific services and/or programs; all of which further the goal of increasing fathers' involvement in their children's lives.
- **Principle 3:** That outreach materials, illustrations, posters, brochures, and other collateral materials include positive and diverse images of fathers being fathers and that facilities provide father-friendly environments with materials consistent with the needs and interests of men and fathers.
- **Principle 4:** That Alameda County family service programs, agencies, and organizations create positions that serve fathers and actively recruit men to fill those positions to better address the needs of fathers. To facilitate recruitment, we recommend the development of a career track for father services, e.g. active recruitment of young men into social services with scholarships, internships, and explicit advertising that "men are strongly urged to apply."
- **Principle 5:** That Alameda County programs, agencies, and organizations working with families strive to provide training for all staff on working with men and on fatherhood issues.
- **Principle 6:** That Alameda County programs, agencies, and organizations develop program policies that include a clear expectation that fathers should and will participate.
- **Principle 7:** That Alameda County agencies and organizations make every effort to create the image that its programs are designed for fathers, as well as for mothers and children.

## Desired Outcomes

Based upon the Father-Friendly Principles, ACFC's goals are to:

- Advocate for government and philanthropy to include language for all family service funding allocations that requires partners to provide services consistent with the Alameda County Fathers Corps Father-Friendly Principles.
- Promote and assist with the implementation of the Alameda County Fathers Corps Father-Friendly Principles throughout Alameda County.



- Increase awareness of the importance of strengthening the bond between fathers, their children, and families.
- Expand the pool of Father Engagement Specialists and Mentors who are available to support Alameda County family service programs.

Of note, while Alameda County Fathers Corps it is not an evidence-based intervention, it is currently in the preliminary stages of internally evaluating data to determine efficacy of this intervention on the Alameda County Systems of Care.

### **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

ACFC recommends the following strategies to engage fathers and shift the narrative on fathers:

- Ensure all family service program models funded by and contracted out with County funds include a fatherhood component and are effectively engaging and supporting the needs of fathers/father-figures.
- Offer family and father- specific services after hours to accommodate the work schedules of fathers.
- Train family service providers on how to engage fathers and father figures in a father-friendly manner that welcomes full participation; and increase the numbers of male staff within family service organizations at all strategic levels.
- Create an Inter-Agency Fathers and Families Council to monitor proposed and existing policies and practices within the family court system, Social Services Agency, Health Care Services Agency, and Probation.
- Provide programs, through Alameda County Family Court and family service systems, that support fathers and mothers to develop and maintain healthy co-parenting relationships.
- Require that father-friendly principles be reflected in measurable contract outcomes for family services providers doing business with Alameda County agencies.
- Review the 'best-interest-of-the-child' standard utilized by Family Court staff and the judicial bench to ensure that irrelevant criminal histories are not given undue evidentiary weight by the staff against fathers or father figures.

- Adequately fund and staff County expungement resources to remove barriers to employment and housing opportunities for fathers and father figures with past convictions.

## PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

# POWER OF FATHERS



### Program Description

Power of Fathers (PoF) is an innovative collaboration focused on improving outcomes for children by improving the life circumstances of their fathers. PoF works on the individual, organizational, and policy/system-level to create change.

### Communities Served

Each year, PoF works with over 100 low-income fathers of color from the Greater Englewood, North Lawndale, and across Chicago, Illinois as they become assets to their children, families, and communities. The neighborhoods that Power of Fathers focuses on are highly disinvested in Chicago. It is also important to note that PoF defines fathers as men that hold a significant caretaking role in their lives (e.g. fathers, mentors, afternoon school workers, teachers).

#### Just the Basics

- Location: Chicago, Illinois
- Services: classes, case management, training, technical assistance, systems-building, community organizing/policy advocacy
- For: fathers of color, men of color that identify as caregivers, organizations, and systems

### Organizational Context

PoF is an innovative collaboration of four agencies in Chicago: Children's Home + Aid, Family Focus, Metropolitan Family Services, and Fathers, Families, and Healthy Communities. Each partner provides two staff members. These staff members are either Navigators (long-term Licensed Social Workers that also have lived experience) that provide direct services and facilitate group meetings or an advocate who is an organizational representative and supervisor. Additionally, PoF utilizes support from community partners (e.g. mental health clinicians, legal aid).

## **Program Model and Strategies**

PoF uses multiple strategies to shape outcomes at three levels: individual, organizational, and systems/policy.

At the individual level, PoF support fathers that need help navigating organizations and systems to receive the support needed to improve their circumstances. The organization believes that stabilizing fathers as individuals is necessary before focusing on their roles as father and co-parent. Navigators support fathers in the following areas: education, employment – job placement and retention, health, financial literacy, legal assistance, social services, and housing. PoF also offers a 12-week workshop utilizing an integrated curriculum that develops fathers as men, as parents, and as co-parents. The curriculum is comprised of elements from: Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) developed by Loyola University Chicago, 24/7 Dads developed by National Fatherhood Initiative (parents) and Parenting Together Project from University of Minnesota with curriculum adaptations made by Metropolitan Family Services. The workshop aims to cultivate peer support through guided conversations and activities that peers lead and offer their advice. Each week is structured by a theme (e.g. healthy relationships, conflict resolution, goal setting) and is relevant to what is happening in the fathers' lives.

At the organizational level, PoF works to improve the father engagement practices, policies, and programs of the four partner agencies. Partners complete organizational assessments to measure the quality of their father engagement across their organizations. This assessment examines multiple areas in the organization including outreach and engagement, operations, policies and procedures, staffing/human resources, co-parenting activities, physical environment, program services, and recruitment. The partners then develop and implement organizational improvement plans based on their assessments. PoF tracks the improvements each organization makes and evaluates the impact of the fathers and families they serve.

At the policy/systems level, PoF works with external stakeholders, participating fathers, and policymakers to identify and address policies and systems that

have hindered or prohibited fathers from being engaged in their families and communities. PoF's policy efforts have covered the following issues: child support, housing, parenting time (custody/visitation), women's rights, access to social services and benefits, children's rights, criminal and civil judicial issues, and racial and gender equity. PoF also partners with Community Organizing and Family Issues to train participating fathers in advocacy and community organizing. Lastly, PoF's Learn. Act. Engage. Discussion Series shares policy challenges and opportunities in improving father engagement and outcomes for fathers, families, and communities.

### **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

PoF is a father-centered program. It was founded to address fathers being missing in the conversations about, and services for, families. By engaging fathers, PoF believes it can improve the lives of children. At the same time, PoF works to help agencies that are struggling with father engagement because lack of father engagement can be more of a reflection on the organization's practices than the father.

### **Desired Outcomes**

PoF aims to create the following outcomes:

- Improvement in life circumstances (e.g. employment, housing, education).
- Increase in quality and amount of time spent with children (e.g. transitioning from hanging out to engaging in developmental activities).
- Increase in time spent discussing co-parenting and setting up a co-parenting plan.
- Organizational partners improvement in policy and practices and ability to offer best practices and learnings to other organizations.
- Policy and systems change and a development of a policy agenda.

### **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

Organizations need to offer programming that suits fathers. For example, each partner organization offers programs at different times but moves through the curriculum at the same time so fathers can go to different groups if their schedule



changes. To ensure that programming resonates with fathers, use a human-centered design approach; work with participants where they are and then layer on more defined goals; and give longer-term participants leadership roles. PoF offers opportunities for fathers to co-facilitate groups, recruit participants, and organize communications for the groups.

Work with fathers is not a simple, time-limited process. As such, organizations need to offer long-term support for fathers. Many fathers have stayed with PoF because they understand and address very complicated issues that are often multi-generational. Many fathers have repeated the 12-week workshop multiple times. Another part of this approach is not to address fatherhood with participants right away. Instead, begin with exploring with participants what it means to be men. Many of the fathers in PoF needed to understand their own challenges with their own fathers before attending to their parenting role.

Just as fathers in programs are doing their own work, organizations also need to reflect on their practices and stances around fathers and other co-parents. If organizations do not participate in this parallel process, then fathers will not remain engaged.

## PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

# NATIVE AMERICAN FATHERHOOD & FAMILIES ASSOCIATION



### Program Description

Native American Fatherhood & Families Association (NAFFA) is a nonprofit organization that provides programs to strengthen Native American families through responsible fatherhood and motherhood. Their program supports parents in taking leadership role in keeping families together and growing healthy children. The organization has three signature curricula: 1.) Fatherhood Is Sacred®,

Motherhood Is Sacred™, 2.) Linking Generations By Strengthening Relationships®, and 3.) Addressing Family Violence & Abuse. The Fatherhood Is Sacred® and Motherhood Is Sacred™ programs are the foundational curriculum on which Linking Generations By Strengthening Relationships® and Addressing Family Violence & Abuse builds upon.

#### Just the Basics

- Location: 240 American Tribal communities throughout North America, main office is in Mesa, Arizona
- Services: trainings
- For: fathers and mothers

### Communities Served

NAFFA serves over 240 Native American Tribal communities throughout North America. The organization works with tribes from Alaska to Florida, Maine to Hawaii, and several First Nation Bands in Canada. NAFFA also works with a variety of departments, such as Behavioral Health, Social Services, TANF, Education, Courts, Probation, Jails, Boys and Girls Club, Tribal Casinos/Human Resources, and Urban Indian Centers.

### Organizational Context

NAFFA has 12 staff and three to four volunteers/interns. As of 2019, the organization has certified 239 facilitators across the country. Direct services have also been provided in the Mesa, Arizona community area to about 847 participants through the Parent Resource Center.

## **Program Model and Strategies**

NAFFA's approach is a strength-based model. The organization does not rely on knowledge-based models because when working with clients, the belief is that knowledge rarely changes people. Instead, NAFFA focuses on empowering participants and providing them hope through upliftment and encouragement. The organization's programs focus on issues of self-worth and provide participants with tools and opportunities to change for the better and to give back to the community. Everyone is welcome and given an opportunity to attend and participate. The organization does not focus on which parents/families fit into their programs, but rather how the program can work for participants. This puts participants' needs before the program in order to meet fathers/mothers/families where they are.

## **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

NAFFA's curricula is based upon the idea that every institution has leaders, and the family is no different. The organization posits that fathers must take a significant role in leading their family to being happy and safe with the partnership of the mothers. As such, the organization seeks to help fathers understand what a leader is; being a leader does not mean being more important or having the final say, but fulfilling a responsibility to lead by example, being a good, decent, and honorable person/father/husband/leader.

NAFFA strives to always welcome and include fathers in the services provided. The programs specifically give examples and details about the importance and necessary involvement of fathers. The organization believes fathers are the most untapped resource in many communities and their involvement can be a solution to many challenges. Some examples of engaging fathers include having posters of father involvement, diaper changing tables in men's and women's restrooms, and providing time off for paternity.

## **Desired Outcomes**

NAFFA's goal is to help Native American families be strengthened and set an example across the US of what a "Happy and Safe Family" can look like. Part of this

has been shown by a reduction in recidivism rates among participants and an increase in father involvement.

The intervention of NAFFA, is not currently evidenced-based; however, work is being done with a team of researchers from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to develop the appropriate tools to collect data and evaluate program outcomes.

### **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

NAFFA believes that fathers must realize their sacred role. Native Americans believe in a life after death. They believe that one may earn a title of Director, President, Judge or CEO, but there will be a time in this life that a specific title/job will leave you and it will no longer be part of your day-to-day life. However, one's title/role as a father will be with you even after this life. One who is a father to their child in this life and is also one in the next life. In that way, NAFFA encourages Native men to take pride in their title as a father.

# FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY YOUNG PARENTS PROJECT



**YOUNG PARENTS PROJECT**  
Florida State University  
Center for Prevention &  
Early Intervention Policy

## Program Description

The Florida State University (FSU) Young Parents Project is an intensive, home visiting program that addresses the complex needs of court-involved pregnant and parenting teens and their young children and the teen's right to parent with support, safety, and dignity. These teens have extensive trauma histories, deeply embedded in under-resourced communities. Most have experienced victimization due to violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation. The high prevalence of complex trauma for these young parents impedes not only their ability to follow-through with positive life choices, but also impacts the relationships they have with their children.

### Just the Basics

- Location: Florida
- Services: home visiting
- For: court-involved pregnant and parenting teens and their young children

## Communities Served

The FSU Young Parents Project operates in two distinct areas in Florida. One project is in northern Florida, the capitol city area that includes Tallahassee and four surrounding rural counties and the other project covers two large, densely populated, urban counties in south Florida: Miami-Dade and Broward Counties.

The program serves court-involved teen mothers and their babies through a contract with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. In the last four years, the program has served 167 young families. In the North Florida counties, 80 percent of the adolescent mothers were Black, 13 percent were White non-Hispanic, with 7 percent other. In South Florida, 64 percent of the adolescent mothers were Black, 32 percent White Hispanic, and 4 percent other. At time of intake, over half had not completed high school with most living in poverty. Of the identified fathers, 77 percent were adult men and 23 percent of the young men under age 18, 51 percent had a high school diploma.



## Organizational Context

The program has seven home visitors, composed of an all-female staff that represent a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including White, Hispanic, Black, and both English and Spanish speakers. Most are master's level professionals, including a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, a Nurse Practitioner, two Registered Nurses, and three MSW Social Workers. The program utilizes a wide range of community resources including schools, teen parent programs, and community colleges, physical and mental health services, trauma, trafficking and sexual abuse treatment providers, and partnerships with child welfare and juvenile justice.

## Program Model and Strategies

The FSU Young Parents Project is adapted from Yale University's evidence-based model called *Minding the Baby*®. The model uses a reflective practice parenting approach designed to address the teen mother's trauma, promote the attachment relationship between the parent and baby, and support both their physical and mental health needs. The *Minding the Baby*® national replication program is involving fathers in their work and has provided support and encouragement in relationship-based work with both parents.

The program utilizes the following primary strategies:

- The project uses an interdisciplinary team of highly skilled professionals (Social Worker, Nurse, and Infant Mental Health Specialist) to provide weekly home visits and extensive follow-up services.
- Fathers are invited into the existing visits with the mothers and babies and staff provide outreach to talk with fathers individually about their role as a parent.
- The starting point with fathers is often similar to mothers in providing for concrete needs and linking them to education or employment. This leads to dialogue about their hopes and dreams for their child and addressing their own parenting and trauma history.
- Strategies of the Fatherhood Initiative include a focus on their needs as a father, engaging with their child, considering co-parenting strategies,

connecting to community resources, and increasing reflective capacity to hold their baby in mind.

### **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

The FSU Center received a small grant from Casey Family Programs to support the exploration of ways to engage fathers as critical participants in the healthy development of their children. This allowed for the Fatherhood Initiative to begin in 2018 with ongoing staff education, reflection, and discussion. The program now engages fathers during home visits and offers them supportive services when necessary. In 2019, seven fathers or “father figures” of children in the FSU Young Parents Project agreed to participate in the in-depth qualitative interviews conducted by a research consultant. The purpose of the qualitative study is to explore how the FSU Young Parents Project can enhance its service delivery model to be more father-friendly. The fathers were recruited by the FSU Young Parents Project’s staff in Tallahassee and Miami.

**“I know you are there to help me even more than my own case manager because you answer your phone. I know when I call, you will help me out. You listen to what I have to say ... like I can be real with you.”**

*Father Program Participant,  
FSU Young Parents Project*

This process and journey have yielded the following learnings around father engagement:

- Time must be spent with staff to understand the importance of fathers and reflect on how their interactions impact fathers’ willingness to participate in a home visiting program.
- Some fathers of the children of teen mothers are also adolescents and some are older adults. Strategies must be adapted to the developmental age of the father.
- Data collection tools must include intake and ongoing information on both parents.
- Program policies and procedures must be reviewed to include a focus on fathers.

- Many of the fathers need extensive support services to address an array of challenges, and once known to staff, the fathers are appreciative of the time spent addressing their needs.
- High rates of incarceration, particularly in rural areas, impact the program's ability to involve fathers in ongoing home visits.
- Despite multiple challenges faced living in under-resourced communities, fathers interviewed showed remarkable resilience and a desire to make life better for their children.

### **Desired Outcomes**

The FSU Young Parents Program seeks to promote the following outcomes:

- Staff recognize the critical role that fathers play in the lives of their children and invite the participation of both parents.
- Parents understand the concept of co-parenting, with reduced conflict and increased attention to the needs of their child.
- Both mothers and fathers are engaged as critical participants in the healthy development of their children.

### **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

The high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system, particularly for people of color, impacts their own experiences of being parented and the ability to parent their children. Fathers describe the barriers they face based on their own criminal history and/or discrimination they experienced due to their race. Mass incarceration impacts identity and the ability to be an involved parent of a child. Young fathers, often raised in poverty, may not have the educational background and/or job training to make a living wage. This impacts housing stability, nutrition, and health care over time, and may mean long hours away from their children as they attempt to address the financial needs of their family. Extensive supports at a younger age will promote the ability for fathers to provide stability and meaningful engagement with their child over time.

Many fatherhood initiatives have taken place in larger, northern cities with fewer programs in the south. While there are extensive home visiting programs in the

south, most do not engage fathers in a meaningful way. It is important to shine a unique spotlight on the needs of fathers, serving them in an inclusive manner within programs across the country. As such, traditional home visiting programs must recognize the critical role of both parents, taking steps to create a culture change at multiple levels. Becoming a “father-friendly” program is a developmental process, requiring the program’s commitment over time.

## PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

# FUSSY BABY NETWORK



## Program Description

The Fussy Baby Network helps families struggling with their infants' crying, sleeping, or feeding. The program provides support through home visits, parent groups, and a Warmline.

## Communities Served

In the greater Chicago area, the Fussy Baby Network program provides services across Cook County, Dupage County, Lake County, and Kane County. Its Warmline for parents with questions about their baby's health and development offers support nation-wide. In general, the program services families with babies ages zero to one year and foster families with babies ages zero to two years of age. The program's home visits serve 110-120 new families a year. Between all three of the program areas, 800-1,000 families are served annually. The Fussy Baby Network also partners with the Department of Children and Family Services to conduct the Early Childhood Screening Project.

### Just the Basics

- Location: there are programs across the US, but in Illinois it operates in Cook County, Dupage County, Lake County, and Kane County
- Services: home visits, parent groups, Warmline
- For: parents/caregivers and infants

## Organizational Context

The Fussy Baby Network is housed within the Erikson Institute. Its clinical services are housed under Erikson Institute's Center for Children and Families.

## Program Model and Strategies

The Fussy Baby Network utilizes the Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN) approach as both an engagement and therapeutic model. Each service aims to build relationships through attunement and engages parents, caregivers, and

professionals in reflective practice. The model provides broad guidelines for sharing information and giving “advice” and ensures that services are guided by the readiness of the caregiver. The goal is to assist parents in co-regulation processes so that they are better able to access their higher cognitive functioning by thinking through and problem solving using their own foundational knowledge and skills.

The Warmline is staffed by infant specialists that provide research-supported information to parents in a compassionate and sensitive way. Services are provided in both English and Spanish Monday through Friday from 9:00am CT to 5:00pm CT. Home visits are offered within a week after being requested. Home visiting staff work with parents to talk about the baby’s day, think about strategies for soothing and calming the baby, and explore ways to support the parent in enjoying their time with their baby more. Parent groups are facilitated in hospitals and community centers across Chicago to help caregivers learn how to cope with and soothe fussy babies and realize that they are not alone.

### **Father Engagement Stance and Critical Learnings**

The Fussy Baby Network is currently on a journey to fully understand and embody father-friendly practices and stances. The program makes a conscious effort to meet with the important people in the baby’s life to think about the whole family. Due to the structure of the services, the focus, by default, is the person who calls the program, but staff are conscious to ask about and bring fathers in as appropriate to the initial referral.

The program is reflecting on and being more deliberate and sensitive in asking about all parents and caregivers. Staff assume that fathers are interested and will ask for the father’s perspective (even when he is not in the room). When appropriate, fathers are encouraged to be present during services. Supervisors model this approach through asking about and including father in team meetings. New staff are taught that father engagement is an important part of their work, not just a “nice” thing to ask about.



## **Desired Outcomes**

The Fussy Baby Network aims to engage all parents/caregivers in their services. At the same time, they do not exert any control or norms around family structure.

The Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN) approach, which is in the core engagement and therapeutic intervention of this program, is officially classified as a promising practice through the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs.

## **Recommendations for Culture/Systems/Policy Change**

The Fussy Baby Network has learned that father engagement is a programmatic shift. It requires staff to talk about it (e.g. What does it mean to have men present and engaged during a home visit?) and to value it. All caregivers for the baby should be present. To support and create space around this, there needs to be language used during services, on forms, and with promotion that is not mother-centric and honors fathers as an important caregiver. The Fussy Baby Network is heavily focused on the relationships between caregivers and their young children. As such, the program recognizes that being father-friendly is really about the integration of fathers into the work of helping to foster stronger relationships between mothers, fathers, and other important caregiver with their babies.





**Recommendations**



# RECOMMENDATIONS

In reviewing the evidence on the role of fathers in their young children's healthy development, and in consultation with practitioners and researchers across the US, committee members offer the following recommendations, which are organized in three core categories: program, policy, and research recommendations.

## PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Advance equity in parenting outreach/engagement by drafting language, images, and strategies that reflect more inclusive gender-neutral terms (i.e., parent, guardian, caregiver), a broad diversity of caregiver images, and explicit articulation of male parenting/caregiver engagement as a core guiding principle and priority and intentional commitment.
2. Ensure that father/male caregiver programs are respectful of, and aligned with, cultural values, principles, and practices of the population served. Programs should articulate an explicit commitment to eliminating gender, racial, class bias.
3. Review, and amend as necessary, all program conceptual frameworks, goals, implementation procedures, and evaluation strategies to ensure engagement of the male(s) in the child/family system is a priority. A strategy for recruiting, hiring, and retaining male service providers should be included in this effort.
4. Design programs that fully engage with all parents and caregivers. By eliminating a sole focus and expectation that mothers are the only caregivers, programs can

**“[A good father puts] family above all. Put the baby before me. If I had to decide who eats, the baby or me, the baby’s got to eat. If either I want to buy a new game or buy Pampers, buy Pampers for the baby. Everything is for the baby.”**

*Fatherhood Interview,  
FSU Young Parents Project*

avoid marginalizing fathers and other co-parents, and better serve the complex needs of families.

5. Regarding non-resident male parents/caregivers, ensure program policies articulate strategies to outreach/engage them in parenting support services such as home visiting, community programs, and other resources/supports that promote positive co-parenting relationships, as well as strengthened individual parenting. This includes insuring that programming/services occur at times fathers can attend.
6. Ensure program curricula are inclusive of evidence-based information and resources that articulate:
  - Fathers' positive parental engagement during a child's early years is significantly linked with cognitive and social skills in later childhood.
  - Fathers' use of restrictive discipline can adversely affect cognitive and social skills in later childhood.
  - The effects of fathers' parenting are uniquely important in the early development and well-being of a child, separate from the mother's impact on the child.
7. Expand and intensify supplementary services in male/parenting programs to include housing assistance, pro-bono or low-cost legal services, and mental health services, particularly for those who have experienced employment challenges, housing insecurity, incarceration, trauma, and other adverse circumstances.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

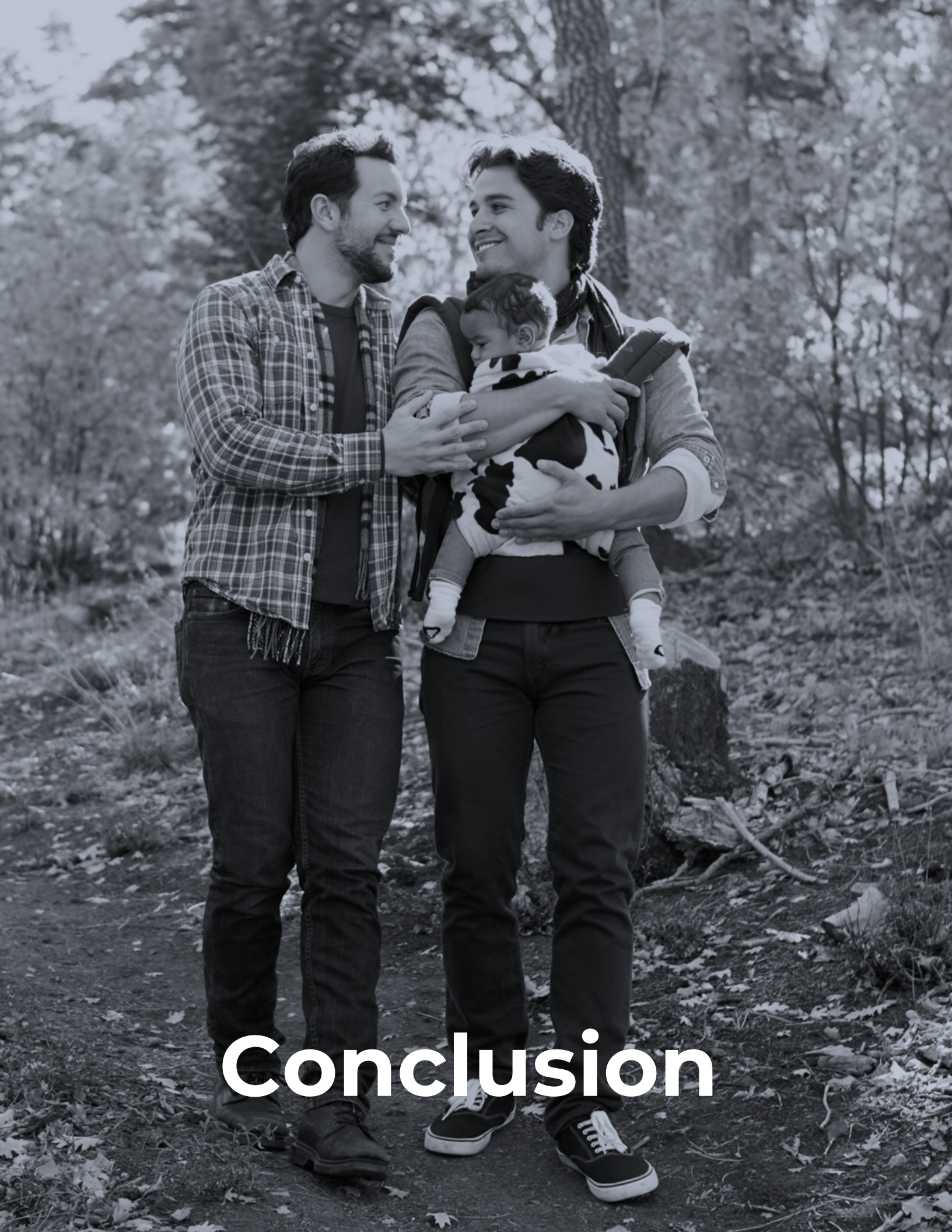
1. Advocate for increased investment in evidence-informed, culturally competent co-parenting programs that are designed to support the healthy development of a variety of family structures.
2. Advocate for an explicit commitment across entities that advance maternal and child health policies to be inclusive in consideration of male parents/caregivers in recommendations for child/family health and well-being.

3. On a national level, advocate for an overhaul of systems that impact male participation in their children's lives (e.g. issues regarding incarceration, employment, housing, child support, custody, visitation).
4. Advocate to reform current tax, welfare, and child support policies to encourage family formation and father involvement, for example (Mincy, 2015):
  - Eliminate the distinction between single-parent and two-parent families in determining TANF eligibility
  - Increase TANF funds to support fatherhood engagement initiatives
  - Expand eligibility for Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to include noncustodial fathers who pay child support
  - Mandate Healthy Start, Early Head Start, Head Start, and other public programs serving children and families develop more father-friendly practices and programs

## **RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Increase investment in developmental research and program outcome evaluation that examines the impact on families and communities of fully including fathers/male caregivers in program services.





**Conclusion**



# CONCLUSION

Research, practice, and an equity perspective all indicate that including fathers in work with infants, children, and families can help to strengthen communities. In the *Literature Overview*, we discussed findings around fathers and early childhood development. The *Program Spotlights* shed light on the ways that engaging fathers and strengthening their capacity as caregivers has strengthened their programming. While each program and organization have a different journey toward father engagement, some of the best practices shared across them include:

- Meet fathers where they are. Physically, this means creatively expanding the range of locations services are offered and when services are offered. Figuratively, this means starting where the gaps in knowledge, fears, and anxieties are for fathers.
- Open space for all caretakers to receive services and be consulted.
- Create and maintain space to reflect on and address the ways your programs do, or do not, include all caregivers. Seek input from participants and excluded caregivers. And remember, organizations not only communicate through service provision, but also through forms and images.
- Supportive spaces for fathers need to both provide skill development activities and space to explore identity development, masculinity, coparenting, and the structures and institutions fathers are navigating.
- Training and support group activities should also offer a networking/community-building component.

Lastly, the recommendations section offers concrete ways that programs, decision-makers, and researchers can consider, to make authentic father engagement a reality across all family-serving programs. These recommendations included micro to macro changes that can be made because sustainable work around father engagement requires a multi-system approach.

We hope this concept paper is a catalyst for, and inspires, your program's journey in father engagement. We welcome your feedback, thoughts and reflection, which can be shared here: <https://bit.ly/2I65hWB>

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