



Birth to 5 Father Engagement Programming Guide

Introduction to Birth to 5 Father Engagement Guide



Early Childhood
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For more information about this resource, please contact us:
PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481

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ADMINISTRATION FOR
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NATIONAL CENTER ON
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Head Start programs partner with fathers to promote positive outcomes for children, families, and fathers themselves. Staff work with fathers to help them develop their skills and interests and achieve goals for themselves and their families. Programs support fathers as advocates, lifelong educators, and first teachers of their children.

“The Head Start fathering program is like a life support to me.” —Head Start father




In this resource, the term “father” refers to fathers and other men who play a significant role in raising a child. This person may be a biological father, adoptive father, or stepfather. He may be a grandfather, another adult male family member, foster father, guardian, or the mother’s significant other. He may also be the expectant partner of a pregnant woman.

Father engagement is not a stand-alone program initiative, but a vital and integrated aspect of parent, family, and community work. A systemwide integration of multiple activities builds a comprehensive father-engagement approach. Among these activities are:

- Creating father-friendly environments that are welcoming and comfortable
- Forming fathers’ groups that plan activities and build support networks
- Training staff to implement a parenting curriculum that develops the knowledge and skills of fathers
- Investing in professional development to strengthen staff skills and practices with fathers
- Including fathers in parent-teacher conferences and home visits
- Designing recruitment materials that appeal to fathers
- Collaborating with community partners to align and reinforce strategies that respond to fathers’ strengths, interests, and needs

Effective engagement of fathers requires staff to demonstrate genuine curiosity and respect for the unique strengths, talents, cultures, goals, and circumstances of fathers. A trusting relationship is the foundation for this partnership. Successful partnerships can lead to positive, long-lasting outcomes for fathers, children, and families.

This series is designed for all Head Start staff who interact with fathers, from program leaders and managers to direct service staff, such as family service workers, fatherhood coordinators, teachers, home visitors, health staff, and transportation providers. This series is also useful for parent leaders, community partners, and Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) specialists.



“Father engagement reflects the strengths, needs, and interests of fathers; the skills and expertise of program staff; and the resources in the community. There is no “one size fits all” approach.”—Fatherhood coordinator

How is this series organized?

This series is organized around the [Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement \(PFCE\) Framework](#). The Framework guides collaboration among families, Head Start and Early Head Start programs and staff, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring change for children and families. The Framework is the foundation for father engagement efforts.

What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?

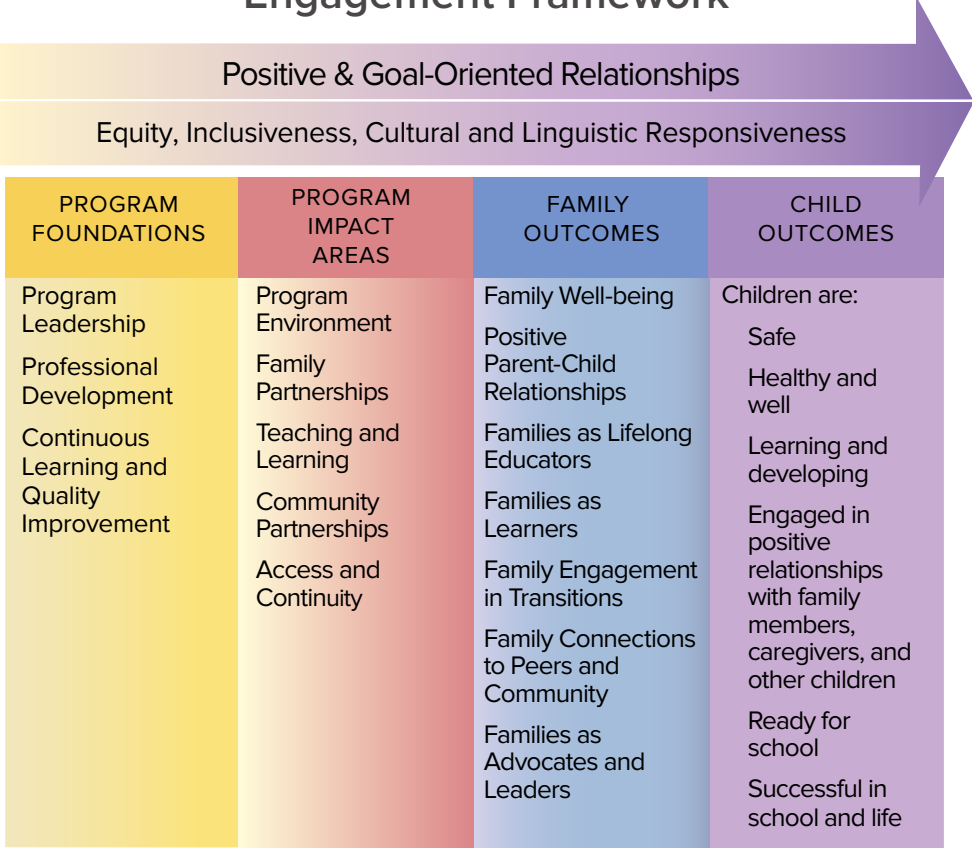
The PFCE Framework describes the program foundations and impact areas that can positively influence family and child outcomes. The foundations are coordinated to support impact areas. The impact areas are selected service areas that have the greatest influence on family outcomes. Taken together, these eight program elements promote systemic, integrated, and comprehensive PFCE, and they anchor father engagement programming.

The two arrows at the top of the PFCE Framework span all elements and point to positive outcomes. These arrows represent dynamic approaches that drive all PFCE activities. The intersection of these guiding arrows with the elements of the PFCE Framework is the basis for programs’ work with fathers.

This series consists of eight brief guides. Each guide focuses on a program element and its relationship to father engagement and positive outcomes. Also included are practical recommendations for program leaders and staff, a short scenario, and follow-up questions.

The scenario presents a program strategy that was used to strengthen father engagement, or it's a reflection from a father or staff member about fatherhood programming. References to online resources provide additional information and useful tools for each element. The voices of program staff and, most importantly, fathers are reflected throughout the guides.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



How Can I Use This Series?

You can read the guides from beginning to end, or you can select individual guides. The scenarios and follow-up questions can be used in professional development activities to strengthen father engagement. Keep track of what works and what doesn't work for you and for your program. Collect data to inform your annual program plans, program goals, and five-year strategic plan. Share what you learn with communities and partners at your local, state, and federal levels.

Look for these icons throughout the guide to find strategies and key points from fathers, programs, and researchers:



Key Points from the Field




Strategies

The goal of the Administration for Children and Families is to create a culture of engagement that encourages and supports fathers in becoming more involved in their children’s lives. Refer to [ACF-IM-18-01](#) to learn about the benefits of father engagement and best practices across human service agencies.

Using the PFCE Framework in Father Engagement: Positive, Goal-Oriented Relationships

In the PFCE Framework, the top arrow refers to relationships among staff, families, and fathers that promote positive engagement and progress toward goals. Respectful, trusting relationships can develop over time through interactions that focus on the individual’s strengths. When staff and fathers have strong relationships, they share a commitment to set meaningful goals, develop strategies, assess progress, and celebrate success.



When you work hand in hand with families to build trusting relationships, you help families support their children to reach their fullest potential.—
Family services manager

Relationships are:

- Positive — they focus on strengths
- Ongoing — they take time to develop and last
- Goal-oriented — they embrace a commitment to the well-being and success of the family and child

Goal-oriented relationships with fathers contribute to the well-being of families, fathers, and children. Different fathers set different goals, and any one father may have a variety of goals. For example, goals may focus on:

- Increasing the economic stability of the family by finishing high school or getting job training
- Improving health literacy
- Participating in a parenting course
- Developing leadership skills
- Spending more quality time with their child
- Improving their relationship with the child’s mother or co-parent

Goals like these can increase a father's confidence and success as a parent, family member, and member of the community. Program staff partner with fathers to help them establish goals and make progress toward achieving them.

Co-parents include mothers, fathers, and other adults who play a significant role in raising a child. They can be biologically related to the child, or not.

Strengths-based relationships are grounded in the belief that all families can make progress toward their goals. When focusing on the strengths of fathers and valuing their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives, program staff can develop meaningful and authentic relationships with these fathers. Strengthening relationships between staff and fathers builds mutually respectful and effective partnerships that contribute to positive and lasting outcomes for fathers, families, and children.



How do programs promote positive, goal-oriented relationships?

Program leaders can create an organizational culture that fosters strong relationships with fathers. Explore these leadership strategies:

- Create a program-wide environment that values fathers as individuals, honors their experiences, and appreciates the role they play in their child's life.
- Communicate that father engagement is a program priority. It's everyone's responsibility to welcome fathers and support them.
- Accept differences and believe that each father has strengths and the capacity for resilience.
- Focus on professional development that enhances the relationship-building skills and practices.
- Encourage staff to partner with all fathers, including nonresident fathers. Invite them to meetings and activities.
- Reinforce the concept of co-parenting. Both mothers and fathers are partners in their child's well-being and school readiness. Include other co-parents in decisions about the child.
- Help staff understand that self-care is essential for being open to building relationships with children, fathers, and families.

- Promote respectful, responsive relationships among all staff, volunteers, and consultants.
- Ensure that fathers have opportunities to take on leadership roles, including on Policy Councils and in continuous program improvement efforts.
- Build strong community linkages so fathers can access critical resources to help them reach their goals.

Direct service staff who work with fathers can use these strategies to build strength-based relationships:


- Be an attentive listener without making judgment.
- Reflect on the father’s perspective.
- Value a father’s passion.
- Support competence.
- Focus on the father-child relationship.
- Communicate that fathers make unique contributions to child development.

For more information, refer to [Strategies to Build Partnerships with Fathers](#) in this series and the [Building Partnerships with Families Series](#). Additionally, the [Relationship-based Competencies to Support Family Engagement](#) includes suggestions about professional development activities for direct service staff and their supervisors.

Using the PFCE Framework in Father Engagement: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness

An integral part of the PFCE Framework is the second arrow, which indicates equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness. Equity refers to providing opportunities based on the needs of the individual or group. It doesn’t mean the same or equal; it means fair. For example, an equitable perspective recognizes that fathers and mothers may parent differently, but their roles are equally important. The notion of equity applies to all human differences, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, religion, sexual orientation, and abilities.

It can be hard for a child to overcome stigmatization without the help of a father. Fathers must become more worldly in their view of how they want to increase the likelihood of their child being successful in life. Fathers can do this by being more aware of the child’s environment, the support systems, the way that society is actually functioning, and their position in it. – Fatherhood coordinator



The concept of inclusiveness — including fathers in all aspects of a program — is critical. It starts with a program’s outreach efforts to all fathers in all circumstances. Inclusiveness means creating an inviting, affirming environment for fathers of Head Start-eligible children. Fathers are included in discussions about their child’s progress and related concerns. They are encouraged to participate in decision-making about program activities and program governance.

Cultural and linguistic responsiveness means all staff value and appreciate families’ (and fathers’) cultural perspectives and the use of their native language. What does this look like? Fathers feel affirmed and respected. Program-wide responsive policies and procedures are in place. Staff recognize that fathers’ beliefs and practices around caregiving, family roles, and aspirations reflect their cultural perspectives. Staff know that they, too, have a cultural lens. Successful relationships are built when fathers and staff value the perspectives and contributions of one another and care about shared goals and positive outcomes.

The Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), Program Operations, 45 CFR §1302.50(b)(2-3) requires programs to create a welcoming program environment that incorporates the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds of families in the program and community. The HSPPS, Program Operations, 45 CFR §1302.90(c)(iii) require a program to ensure that all staff, volunteers, and other personnel respect and promote the unique identity of each child and do not stereotype on any basis.

The multicultural principles apply to all Head Start programs. Principle 1 states: *Every individual is rooted in culture. Principle 10 states: Culturally relevant and diverse programming and practices are incorporated in all systems and services and are beneficial to all adults and children.* Refer to [The Updated and Revised Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five \(2010\)](#).



How do programs promote equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness?

Program leaders establish policies and procedures in all systems and services that support the aims of equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness. Effective program-wide strategies that focus on fathers include the following:

- Embed the Head Start Multicultural Principles throughout the program and apply them to partnerships with fathers and their families.
- Make sure that father engagement strategies recognize the strengths of the individual and the diversity within any group of fathers. Encourage learning about the cultures, beliefs, and circumstances of each father.
- Ensure the program environment welcomes all fathers and respects diversity across family structures, cultures, languages, perspectives, and values.
- Support fathers' understanding of the equally important and varied contributions that fathers, mothers, and co-parents can make to a child's development.
- Develop communication strategies and program materials that reflect fathers' native languages and cultural perspectives.
- Include the cost of interpretation and translation in the program budget.
- Hire staff, including men, who represent family cultures and speak their languages.
- Conduct culturally and linguistically responsive outreach and recruitment to fathers and their families.
- Dedicate professional development activities to understanding how culture and language affect partnerships with families.
- Use the relationship-based competencies as the foundation for promoting inclusiveness and cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of staff.

Part of the vision of fatherhood programming at Red Cliff is to use cultural traditions as a means to engage fathers in the Head Start program. Tribal elders serve as important role models to fathers. – Fatherhood coordinator



Positive relationships with fathers often require awareness of one’s own biases and how they can impact mutual respect and trust. For example, staff may be unfamiliar with practices or beliefs of a cultural or religious group. Staff’s prior experiences with men — including their own fathers, father figures, and male partners — can affect their relationships with fathers in the program. Focusing on positive past interactions with men provides staff with a foundation for effective partnerships with fathers in Head Start.

As a program leader, provide opportunities for staff to become self-aware and increase their responsiveness to fathers:

- Promote learning about the diverse cultures of families and communities.
- Create safe learning environments where staff can explore their biases and stereotypes.
- Prioritize coaching and reflective supervision to help staff understand the impact of their prior experiences and cultural perspectives.

Refer to [Professional Development Strategies that Promote Father Engagement](#) in this series to learn more about promoting staff self-awareness.



Research Update

Head Start programs can use research to guide and improve their father engagement efforts.

Research on Early Head Start programs shows that:

- Toddlers with resident or involved nonresident biological fathers showed higher levels of self-regulation and lower levels of aggression than children with unstable father connections. (Vogel et al., 2006)
- Toddlers who had at least one supportive parent scored higher on cognitive assessments, regardless of parent gender, than those with none. (Ryan et al., 2006)
- A father's presence in the family promoted positive cognitive outcomes. The toddlers with involved fathers were more secure and more likely to explore the world with enthusiasm. The fathers' presence also increased the mothers' cognitive stimulation of their toddlers. The long-term cognitive effects included higher math and reading skills in fifth grade. (Cook et al., 2011)
- Fathers' playfulness with their toddlers predicted higher language development when the children were preschoolers. (Cabrera et al., 2017)
- Fathers valued stability, mentoring, engagement, and emotional support in their relationships with their young children. (Summers et al., 2006)
- The quality of fathers' interactions with staff made a difference. When fathers felt valued and included in the program and received services that supported development of their parenting skills, they were more engaged in the program and with their young children. (Anderson et al., 2015)



In programs organized by the Responsible Fatherhood Initiative and funded by the Administration for Children and Families (OPRE Report, 2019), fathers reported they:

- Bonded with other men in the groups and program staff, helping them stick with the program and keeping them motivated to improve themselves
- Became better parents and formed deeper emotional connections with their children
- Gained valuable relationship skills that improved communication and co-parenting
- Gained job-seeking skills through the program services

Research shows that effective fatherhood programs:

- Can improve father-child involvement among incarcerated fathers and encourage prosocial behavior by their children. (Roettinger & Swisher, 2012)
- Can use texting as an effective tool for customer service. It provides ongoing support so that fathers feel a stronger connection to the organization, fatherhood program, and staff. (Brown, 2019)

Summaries of research on families of different income levels with young children report that overall, fathers who are involved in their children's lives (Lamb, 2016; Pruett, 2016):

- Are competent caregivers of infants
- Can experience hormone changes after their baby is born that predict their involvement in child care and play (Kuo et al., 2018)
- Interact differently with their children than mothers do
- Contribute to their child's school readiness
- Support the positive parenting of mothers
- Contribute to the well-being of the family
- Show positive gains in their own development and life decisions

Researchers and program staff point out that there is no single definition of successful fatherhood and no ideal father role. Cultural and individual differences in father-child relationships and in co-parenting relationships must be respected and valued for children, families, and communities to thrive.

Resources

- [Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework](#)
- [Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement Series](#)
- [Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders](#)
- [Building Partnership with Families Series](#)

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