



Birth to 5 Father Engagement Programming Guide

Program Strategies to Promote Father Engagement in Their Children's Teaching and Learning



Early Childhood
National Centers

NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

This resource was developed with funds from Grant #90HC0014 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and Office of Child Care by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.

June 2020

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

Suggested citation: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2020). *Birth to Five Father Engagement Programming Guide: Program Strategies to Promote Father Engagement in Their Children's Teaching and Learning*



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



Program Strategies to Promote Father Engagement in Their Children’s Teaching and Learning

Explore this practical guide to learn about engaging fathers in their child’s development and learning in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. This guide includes useful tips that directors, managers, and other staff can apply. It also includes opportunities for practice and reflection.

Fathers and program staff participated in developing this guide. It is part of a series of brief guides about how to implement the [Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement \(PFCE\) Framework](#) to support father engagement in early childhood programs.

Information about the following topics can be found in this guide:

- What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?
- What is teaching and learning in the PFCE Framework?

Program strategies to promote father engagement in teaching and learning are:

- Support father-child relationships
- Share information about child progress
- Partner with fathers in the child’s learning environments

In this resource, the term *father* refers to fathers and male role models who play a significant role in raising a child. This person may be a biological, adoptive, or stepfather.

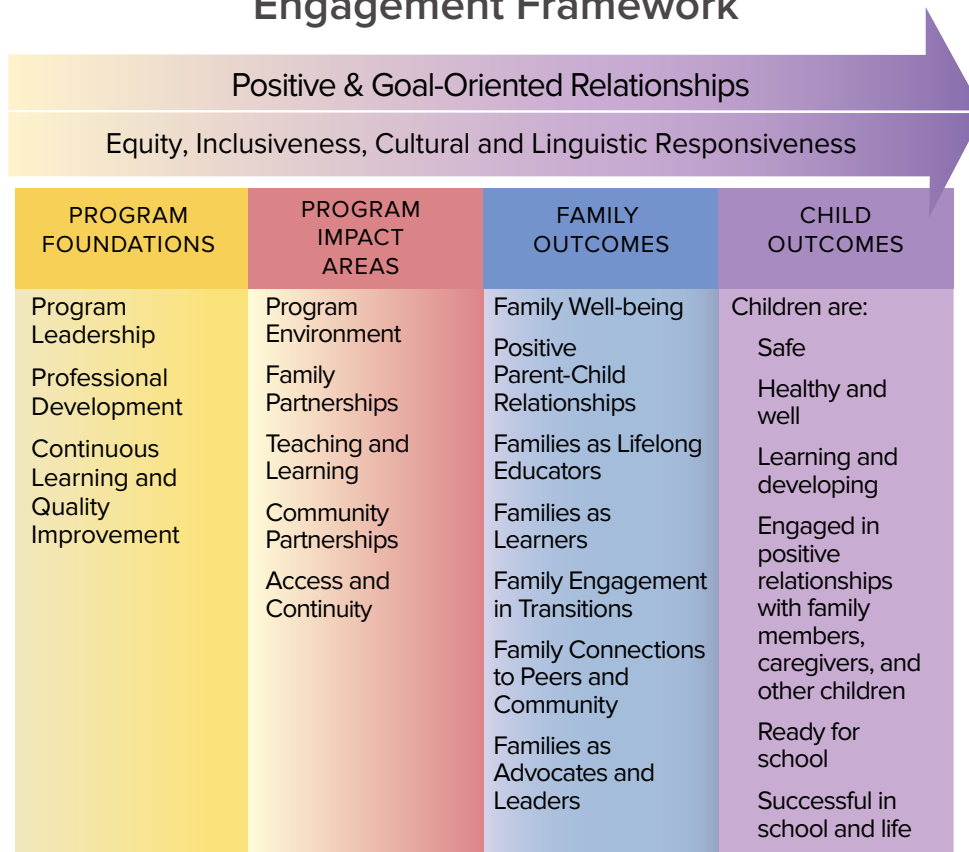
He may be a grandfather, another adult male family member, foster father, guardian, or the mother’s significant other. He may be the expectant partner of a pregnant woman.

What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?

The Head Start PFCE Framework is an organizational guide for collaboration among families, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring outcomes for children and families. The Framework describes the program elements — program foundations and impact areas — in Head Start that can work together to make progress toward these outcomes. The Framework identifies equity; inclusiveness; cultural and linguistic responsiveness; and positive, goal-oriented relationships as important drivers of this work.

The program impact areas in the Framework are program services that have the greatest influence on family outcomes. One of the program impact areas is teaching and learning. Other program elements identified by the Framework, such as family partnerships and continuous learning and quality improvement, can be coordinated to guide the process of father engagement and promote the child’s school readiness.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



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



Key Points from the Field



Strategies

What is Teaching and Learning?

Programs can build strong relationships with parents and show that they see them as their children's first and most important teachers. They can create a welcoming program environment where families feel valued and where staff partner with families to set goals and plan activities. Positive relationships between families and staff nurture parent-child bonds, support parenting, and promote children's learning and development across settings.

“Being a father is the most wonderful thing I will ever experience. If I hadn't been involved with the father program in Head Start, I would never have known this. The day I came to my daughter's classroom was the day that really changed my life.”
– Head Start father

Teaching and learning are mutual and ongoing processes for fathers, families, and program staff. Fathers are teaching when they share their knowledge about their child with the program. Fathers are learning about their child when the program shares information about the child's progress. Together, staff and families develop strategies to support the child's growth and development. These strategies respect families' cultures and affirm their home language(s). Programs also build connections with community partners to offer children and families access to learning opportunities.

What the Research Says

- Fathers interact with their children differently than mothers (Pruett, 2016). Not better, or worse, but differently. Studies show that fathers:
 - Are more physically active with their babies and young children
 - Discipline differently to help their children manage frustration
 - Are more likely to use humor and teasing to redirect behavior
 - Emphasize different vocabulary and ideas when reading aloud
- Both the quality and quantity of father interactions with young children matter. More frequent and positive father involvement impacts children's social and emotional development and cognitive skills (McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013).
- Nonresident father involvement in child-related activities and positive father-child relationships are associated with children's social and emotional well-being, academic achievement, and behavioral adjustment (Adamson & Johnson, 2013).
- Fathers' playfulness with their toddlers boosts their children's vocabulary skills in prekindergarten. Mothers' playfulness is related to children's emotion regulation. (Cabrera, Karberg, Malin, & Aldoney, 2017).

Support Father-Child Relationships

Father-child attachment begins in utero, when the baby hears the father's voice and the father feels the baby kicking. The bond deepens when the father meets his baby for the first time and as he helps care for his infant.

As the baby grows into a toddler and preschooler, the father finds new ways of relating. He can play, talk, read, and sing with his young child. Through everyday interactions, the father can support the child's growing independence, self-expression, and creativity.

During the family partnership process, fathers may set goals focused on their relationship with their child. For example, one father might want to help his child learn to write her name. Another might like to teach his child to help with household chores. Another might want to spend more "quality time" together. To help fathers achieve their goals, staff must establish a mutual, trusting partnership with the father. Fathers are more likely to develop nurturing relationships with their child when they feel appreciated, encouraged, and respected as individuals in the program.

One thing I've learned is to engage early, prenatally, to build that bond and it will serve you through life. I've also learned that rough and tumble play is a good social and emotional regulator. It helps children to understand, "Hey, we're playing. I don't have to hurt you if you step on my shoes or bump into me."
—Head Start father

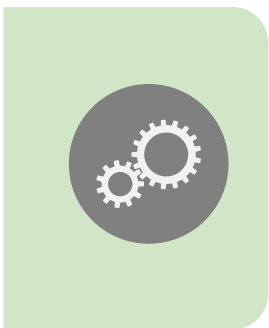




Use these strategies to support the father-child relationship:

- Take time to observe a father and give examples of how he is a role model. Point out how responsive the child is to him and how happy they are together. “See how the baby looks in your eyes and smiles when you pick her up. She’s getting to know you!”
- Comment on the learning that occurs as father and child interact. “He told us you play a counting game at home, and now he’s excited to show us what he knows.”
- Affirm the father’s interests and skills and describe ways they can be shared with the child. Use them as a way to connect with the father. Let him know that his child is talking about him. “Your son was telling us about the animals on your farm and how you feed them together.”
- Validate how complicated parenting can be. Effective parenting is a process of trial and error and requires parents to grow and be ready to make changes as their child develops. “Your goal was to spend more time with your daughter at the same time that you were starting a new job. Does it seem like this is happening?”
- Consider using a parenting curriculum designed for fathers that allows them to explore their role as a parent. Create environments where they can practice their skills with their child in a comfortable and supportive setting.
- Be aware of stress in the family that might negatively impact the father-child relationship. Ensure that program services and community resources are available to support families and fathers through challenging times.
- Respect the different backgrounds and expectations that influence fathers’ relationships with their child. Parenting behaviors and beliefs often reflect fathers’ cultures, including the ways they show affection, establish routines, and teach respect for other people.

Some children’s fathers may not live with them. There are many reasons why, including military service, incarceration, conflict with the child’s mother, or relocation to a new job.



Tips for nurturing a strong relationship between nonresident fathers and their children include:

- Use the family partnership process to set goals that value the father’s parenting role.
- Provide a highly nurturing program environment for children. Choose a strong social and emotional curriculum for children to celebrate their fathers and process their feelings if their father doesn’t live with them.
- Help children stay in touch through letters, phone calls, videoconferencing, and visits when possible.
- Work with teachers, home visitors, mental health consultants, family services staff, and community partners to support a child’s relationship with a nonresident father, if appropriate.

Share Information about Children’s Progress

To promote a child’s learning, parents and staff need to exchange information. Encourage parents to discuss their hopes and expectations for their child. Invite them to share their knowledge about their child and describe the child’s routines, activities, and behaviors. Ask them to share the child’s developmental history and any concerns they have. Use the family partnership process as a time to identify goals for their child.

“Just making a simple phone call after school to find out what my daughter learned that day, what she did, made a difference and strengthened our father-daughter bond. I appreciate my Head Start experience of embracing the impact I have on my child’s life.” – Head Start father



In Head Start center-based and family child care, parent-teacher conferences must be planned at least twice a year to exchange information about the child’s progress and activities in the program and at home. In a Head Start home-visiting program, home visitors must follow up with parents to discuss the learning experiences in the home between each visit, address concerns, and share strategies to promote the child’s school readiness. – Head Start Program Performance Standards (45 CFR §1302.34(b)(3); 45 CFR §1302.35(c)(5))

As staff get to know families and fathers, they learn what fathers know about their children. If fathers have been involved during the prenatal or newborn period, they will have seen major changes in their children. They may have been there for the children's first words or first steps.

If they missed these developmental milestones at home, share something that happened in the program. They may have regrets if they haven't been part of certain events, and they may want to share their feelings. Reassure them that it's never too late to engage in their children's development and learning. When staff and a father share ongoing observations of the child, the father can get a sense of his child's progress. Staff can show that they value his role and support his decisions.



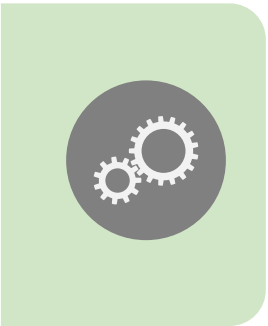
Strategies for promoting open exchanges with fathers about their child's learning and development:

- Encourage fathers to share their observations of their children, their expectations, and their questions.
 - Ask specific questions: "How did your daughter learn to climb the stairs?"
 - Avoid vague questions: "How's she doing at home?"
- Plan teacher-parent conferences or home visits at times convenient for fathers. This may require staff to have a flexible schedule depending on fathers' work or school schedules.
- Focus on the child's strengths and encourage parents to identify and tell you what a child can do before talking about what a child can't do.
- Take opportunities to have brief, positive exchanges with fathers and mothers at the beginning or end of the day. For example, describe how the child learned something new in class or persisted at a task. If a child takes the bus or the father doesn't see the teacher or home visitor regularly, call to share these stories.
- Make the connections between children's learning activities in Head Start and school readiness. Connect the behavior of infants and toddlers to later school success.
- Share observations of children's activities to highlight the connection between learning, exploration, and play. For example, share how a child is learning about math while building with blocks, or developing science concepts at the water table.
- Talk with fathers to discuss the process of development. Explain important ideas, such as "children develop at different rates and in different ways" or "she's letting us know when she doesn't like something by saying no; this can happen as toddlers try out their independence."

- Connect fathers who may have questions or concerns about their child’s development with program support staff, such as a disability services coordinator or the mental health consultant. Reach out to other parents, if appropriate, to provide additional support.
- Affirm that fathers make important and unique contributions to their child’s development. All family members can support children’s learning and development in different ways.

Create communication strategies to ensure that nonresident fathers are engaged with their child’s learning and development. For example:

- Encourages to visit the program.
- Invites fathers to parent-teacher conferences. Find out what times are convenient for them.
- Send written information if a father is unable to attend a home visit or a teacher conference.
- Set up procedures so fathers can contact staff to give input or ask questions about their children’s progress.
- Use technology and mobile devices to exchange information if fathers agree to receive these messages. Many parents enjoy seeing videos of their children engaged in learning.



Partner with Fathers in the Child’s Learning Environments

Children are born ready to learn from everyone and everything around them. They learn as they walk down the street, look around the grocery store, listen to family stories, and talk to the bus driver. Encourage fathers to participate in their children’s everyday exploration and play.

Partner with the father to brainstorm new activities that build on his and the child’s interests. Positive father-child relationships contribute to social-emotional learning, skill building, and healthy development in young children. Father-child interactions also strengthen parental confidence and skills.



What is School Readiness? It is preparing children for success in school and beyond. This is a Head Start program's mission. Offer opportunities for fathers and families to learn more about what this means for young children.

School readiness:

- Is a shared responsibility between Head Start and Early Head Start programs and families
- Starts in infancy
- Includes all aspects of growth and development: social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development — they are all connected
- Includes executive functioning skills: persistence, curiosity, problem solving, and managing emotions and behavior — all are necessary to become a successful learner
- Builds on each child's unique strengths, which are rooted in their family's culture, background, language, and beliefs
- Includes learning through play and exploration

For more information, refer to the [Early Learning Outcomes Framework](#).

“Sometimes when fathers are in a classroom setting, they may feel like they should be teaching early academics to their child. We let them know that they are teaching just by their everyday conversations and interactions. In our Early Head Start program, we see how easy it is for dads to be physical, to crawl and scoot with the children. That play helps the children learn fine and gross motor skills, plus they feel the excitement of interacting with their dads.” – Fatherhood coordinator



Center-based Settings

In a center-based program, encourage fathers and other family members to volunteer in the classroom. Strategies to promote father engagement in the program learning environment include:

- Share the classroom schedule with fathers and give them a choice of what to do when they visit. Some may prefer to look at books with their baby, play with blocks with their toddler, or go to the playground with their preschooler. They may enjoy lunch with the children. Plan in advance if possible.
- Encourage fathers to share their cultures and their interests. A father who knows songs in his home language or who likes woodworking can expand all the children's learning experiences.



- Plan opportunities for fathers and children to engage in fun, interactive activities such as hosting a father-child science exploration with everyday materials.
- Encourage fathers to have follow-up discussions with program staff after volunteering in the classroom. Such opportunities connect father engagement with school readiness and positive child outcomes.
- Invite fathers to provide feedback and ask questions about the curriculum and the teaching strategies that staff use.

Class field trips offer other opportunities for fathers to engage in their child's learning experiences. Ask fathers if they would be willing to volunteer to go on the field trip and help with the follow-up activities back in the classroom. Suggest follow-up activities at home too.

As children get ready to leave Early Head Start or Head Start, encourage fathers to remain involved in their child's education and development. Include them in parent-teacher conferences and planning for their child's transition to a new setting. Let them know that their role is important. Invite them to work with other parents and staff to shape the program's transition process to kindergarten. Share information about how they can be engaged at the elementary school by volunteering in activities or joining the Parent Teacher Association. Share how children benefit when their parents are engaged in their lifelong learning.

One Head Start graduate recalls his first trip to a fire station with his class. He tried on the huge fire boots and the helmet. His favorite memory was seeing his father sliding down the fire pole. From that day on, the father and his son made a point of visiting fire stations together and learning about fire fighters. When fathers and children enjoy activities together, their relationship grows stronger.



Home and Community Settings

Whether the child is enrolled in a center- or home-based program, the home can provide a rich learning environment. Everyday routines and interactions are opportunities for fathers to promote their child's growth and development. Reassure parents that specific toys or electronic devices aren't necessary for their child to learn and be ready for school. Communicate that a safe, secure, and stimulating environment at home motivates their child's love of learning throughout their lives. Positive relationships are key to child well-being and healthy development.



Strategies to promote father-child learning at home include:

- Work with fathers to identify children’s interests and strengths. Help fathers select activities and familiar routines at home that they will enjoy and that will engage their child. Center-based education staff and fathers can share ideas for connections between the classroom and home.
- Encourage fathers to have conversations with their child and to ask questions. Give examples of father-child interaction in the course of everyday activities:
 - While diapering his baby, a father tickles her and sings a favorite song. He says, “Now you have a clean diaper. I bet you feel better. Let’s get you bundled up and go to the park.”
 - A father talks to his toddler when they are sorting clean clothes, “Which T shirt is bigger? Look at all the stripes on yours. Let’s name the colors.”
 - At home, a grandfather is preparing rice and beans for dinner. He points out to the preschooler, “Look at how hard the rice and beans are now. What happens when we add the water and cook them? Your great-grandmother taught me this recipe when I was your age.”
- Keep in mind that fathers are individuals; some may like quiet activities, while others may prefer physical play. Find out what they like to do and learn how they share it with their child. If a child enjoys singing in the classroom, brainstorm ways that his father can listen to music, sing, and dance at home. If a father likes to cook, ask about favorite recipes they can fix together. Find out if they go grocery shopping together and share ideas about what the child is learning.

Help fathers think about the everyday learning possibilities in their neighborhoods. If a child likes to build with blocks and play with the trucks in the sand table, share this information with the father. If there are construction sites in the neighborhood, suggest he and his child watch what is going on and talk about the huge machines. This is science and social studies in action! It is also an opportunity to expand his child’s vocabulary and understanding about how things work.

Talk with fathers about their favorite “child friendly” places in the community. Encourage them to share their ideas with other fathers. Maybe some places would welcome groups of fathers and their children; fathers could talk together, and their children could play together. Consider teaching and learning opportunities such as parks, library story hours, gym time at the YMCA, and children’s theater.

Teaching and Learning in Action

Read below how a home visitor and a nonresident father partnered to support a child's learning and development.

On several occasions when I visited with this family, Dad has been on speakerphone. I have never met or seen Dad, aside from a picture of him at Grandma's house. On a visit I did shortly after the child enrolled in Early Head Start, Dad was on the phone. He told me that he was very pleased with the growth and development he has seen in his son. He thanked me and the program. In more recent visits, Dad has been on the phone asking questions regarding his son's development.

This has given me an opportunity to discuss the curriculum and how the child is doing. I have also been able to address a couple of Dad's concerns about his son's motor development. I told him that each child develops at their own rate. By the time I finished the visit, he felt much better and was not as concerned. Although he's on the speakerphone, this Dad has become a regular part of our home visits. Next time, we're planning to do a video chat so he can see his son's progress, and we can talk about it together.



Reflection

Consider these questions:

How does your program help fathers achieve goals that build and develop the relationship with their child?

Does your program use a parenting curriculum that provides guidance about how children learn? Does it focus on the father's role?

How does your program engage fathers in learning activities with their children in the program? At home? In the community?

Are there opportunities for educators and family services professionals to share information about children's progress?

Do the program goals and school readiness goals emphasize fathers as one of their children's first and most important teachers?

Resources

Explore these resources on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

- [Appreciating How Fathers Give Children a Head Start](#)
- [Early Learning Outcomes Framework](#)
- [Engaging Fathers Webinar](#)
- [Fathers for Life: Strengthening Families and Fatherhood: Children of Fathers in the Criminal Justice System](#)
- [Head Start PFCE Framework](#)
- [Transition to Kindergarten: Activity Calendar for Families](#)

References

Adamson, K. & Johnson, S.K. "An updated and expanded meta-analysis of nonresident fathering and child well-being." *Journal of Family Psychology*, (2013): 27(4); 589-99.

Carbrera N. Karberg, E., Malin, J., & Aldoneu, D. "The magic of play: Low-income mothers' and fathers' playfulness and children's emotion regulation and vocabulary skills." *Infant Mental Health Journal*, (2017): 38(6), 757-771.

McWayne, C., Downer, J.T., Campos, R. & Harris, R.D. "Father Involvement during early childhood and its association with children's early learning: A meta-analysis." *Early Education and Development*, (2013): 24(6); 898-922.

Pruett, K. "Daddy, papi, papa, or baba: The influence of fathers on young children's development." (2016): Retrieved as podcast: https://s3.amazonaws.com/zttpodcastseries/podcast/Kyle%20Pruett%20FINALvs.mp3?s_src=podcast&s_subsrc=fathers



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement