



## Birth to 5 Father Engagement Programming Guide

---

# Strategies to Build Partnerships with Fathers



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: Strategies to Build Partnerships with Fathers*



NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



## Strategies to Build Partnerships with Fathers

Explore this practical guide to learn more about how program staff build strong, meaningful, and authentic relationships with fathers in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. These relationships are the foundation of family partnerships that influence outcomes for children, families, and fathers. This guide highlights strategies that early childhood leaders can apply right away. It also contains ideas 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 use the [Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement \(PFCE\) Framework](#) to engage fathers in early childhood programs.

This guide provides information about the following topics:

- The Head Start PFCE Framework and partnerships with fathers
- Why partnerships with fathers matter

Four strategies to build partnerships with fathers are:

- Develop program policies and practices
- Engage fathers in goal-setting and making progress toward goals
- Build connections with peers
- Create community partnerships

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.

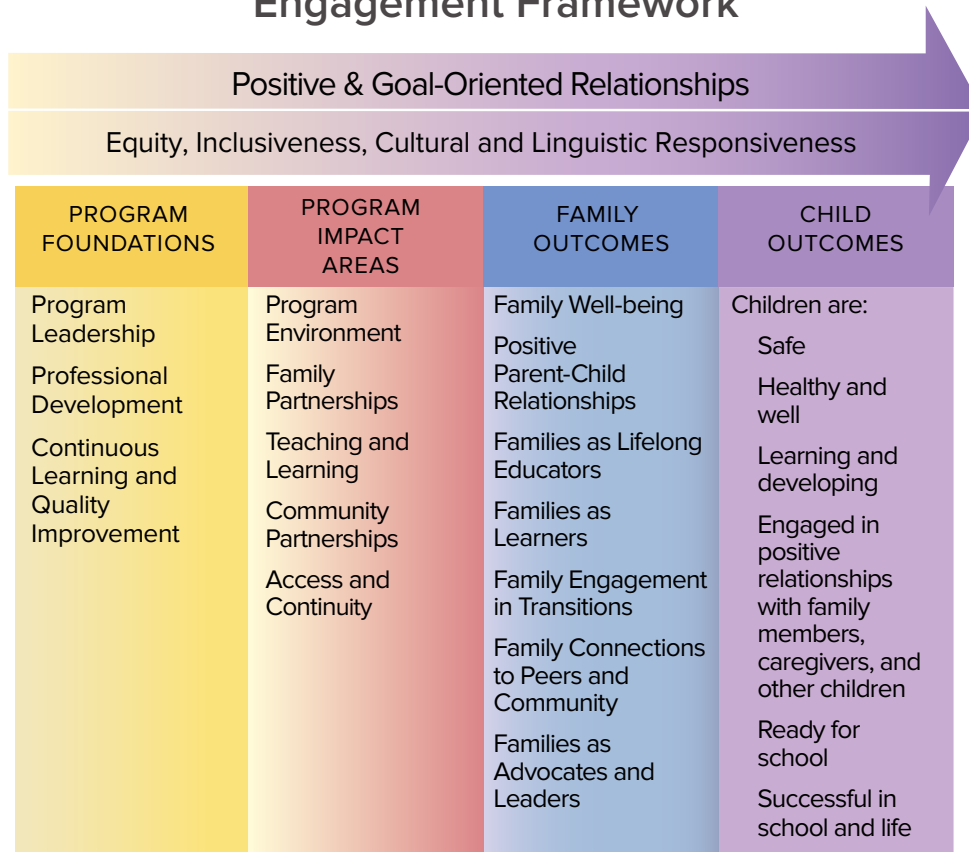
He may be a grandfather, another adult male family member, foster father, guardian, or the mother's significant other. He may be the expectant partner of a pregnant woman.

## 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 early learning programs that can work together to positively influence child and family outcomes. It identifies equity; inclusiveness; cultural and linguistic responsiveness; and positive, goal-oriented relationships as important drivers for these outcomes.

The program impact areas in the Framework are program services that have the greatest influence on family outcomes. One impact area is family partnerships. Other program elements identified by the Framework, such as program leadership, professional development, and program environment can be coordinated together with family partnerships to guide the process of father engagement.

### 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

## Why Partnerships with Fathers Matter

Leaders and managers build support and capacity for data-informed work among staff, families, and community partners. Data-informed work includes selecting indicators of PFCE progress, collecting and analyzing data, sharing information, and using data to make decisions to improve program systems and service delivery. Fathers, mothers, and other family members can be involved throughout the process.

All Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement a family partnership process. This process includes development of an individualized family partnership agreement that identifies strengths, needs, and goals related to the family outcomes in the PFCE Framework. Staff and family members share data, review individual progress, evaluate whether goals are met, revise goals, and adjust strategies as needed. Programs also collect ongoing child assessment data to document a child's progress and support individualized learning. When staff share data about the child with their family, partnerships strengthen to improve child and family outcomes.


### What the Research Says

The quality of fathers' interactions with practitioners makes a difference. When fathers feel valued, are included in the program, and receive services to enhance parenting skills tailored to their needs and goals, they are more engaged in the program and with their young children (Anderson, Aller, Piercy, and Roggman, 2015).

## Develop Program Policies and Practices

Successful partnerships between staff and families are the foundation for setting and achieving positive outcomes. Individual staff members build meaningful partnerships with fathers, but they can't do it alone.

They need program policies and practices that prioritize strong relationships and how they support goal-setting and making progress toward goals. Consider how program leaders, management teams, and governance bodies prioritize strengths-based, trusting relationships with fathers and their families.



“When program staff make it a priority to become knowledgeable about a father’s life circumstances and what resources they may have to successfully fulfill that role as a father, this can help build the level of trust that’s necessary for improved interactions.” – Former teen father and current volunteer mentor to fathers in Head Start



These programwide policies and practices can strengthen staff-family partnerships:

- Plan an intentional approach to developing meaningful and successful family partnerships. Ensure that program leaders and staff understand how the family partnership process promotes positive family and child outcomes.
- Aggregate data from family partnership agreements to identify strengths and gaps in family — and father — engagement efforts and to inform decisions about program-level goals or objectives.
- Create a father-friendly program environment with space, materials, and activities that are inviting to men and suggest the program is a “safe place for me and my family.”
- Ensure that recruitment and enrollment policies include reaching out to all fathers and father figures of eligible children, including nonresidential fathers.
- Use professional development opportunities, including mentoring and coaching, to strengthen staff skills and knowledge about relationship-building with fathers.
- Work with human resources to ensure staff caseloads allow flexible schedules to engage with fathers at times that are convenient for fathers and staff.
- Ensure that performance appraisals address the quality of relationships with fathers and other family members.
- Encourage collaborations between family services staff and other program staff who can support the goal-setting process related to their service area.
- Create forms and documentation systems of the partnership process in the languages spoken by fathers and their families.
- Build in a review process for staff and fathers to revisit their partnership agreement, assess their progress, and make adjustments as needed.
- Coordinate with community partners to provide resources to help fathers reach their goals.
- Gather feedback from fathers about what program services are helpful and effective. Consider ways to strengthen service delivery.

For more ideas about program planning, refer to the guide [Creating Father-Friendly Environments in Early Childhood Programs](#). Also, refer to the resource [Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement for Family Services Professionals](#) to learn about the knowledge, skills, and practices that support family engagement.

## Engage Fathers in Goal Setting and Making Progress Toward Goals


Positive, goal-oriented relationships with families contribute to successful partnerships. Ground the relationships in strengths-based attitudes that convey trust, respect, and a sense of shared responsibility for child and family growth. Value different perspectives and contributions, explore options, and honor all types of family progress.

All families in Head Start and Early Head Start programs can engage in the family partnership process. Meaningful goal setting is the essence of the process. Goal setting helps fathers prioritize their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children by identifying something important to work toward.


Refer to [The Family Partnership Process: Engaging and Goal-Setting with Families](#) for information about the six phases of the process and the seven steps for setting and reaching goals.

A family partnership agreement sets out the goals, action steps, and resources needed to achieve the goal. It is a joint effort between staff and family members. Staff can ensure that fathers have time to plan and reflect. This may be a father's first opportunity to sit with someone and think about his future in this way.

Staff can show appreciation for a father's culture and how it shapes his aspirations. Convey that all fathers and father figures can help set family goals and their own goals. Together, staff and fathers document the agreement to track progress.



“Listen to the families. Don’t just tell them what you are going to do for them. Even if sometimes we don’t say it, too often we think it.”  
– Family services manager



“Some fathers focus on their family’s well-being. Their immediate goal might be to find a job or seek housing stability. A few have long-term goals like building their advocacy and leadership skills for the early childhood program or the wider community. For most of them, a priority is to build strong relationships with their children. And that’s just as true of fathers who don’t live with their children.”  
– Fatherhood coordinator



Tips for goal setting and making progress toward goals with individual fathers:

- Start the partnership process at the time of recruitment and enrollment. Approach fathers with respect and care and begin with their strengths.
- Invite all fathers and father figures to participate in the partnership process. Include expectant fathers and nonresidential fathers.
- Ask what is most important to a father at this time and continue to ask this question during the partnership process.
- Refer to the Head Start PFCE Framework to help fathers generate ideas and structure goal-setting efforts toward one or more of the family and child outcomes.
- Establish goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely.
- Show how fathers' goals connect to their children's healthy development and success in school.

Fathers who set goals and make progress can feel inspired and empowered to help their young children learn and grow. A Head Start father explains, "I'm taking a course in financial literacy. I was a lousy student in school and this course is hard for me. When I see my daughter learn to write her name and make mistakes, I have more patience. I understand that you have to make mistakes to learn."



## Build Connections with Peers

Groups and activities in Head Start and Early Head Start can support fathers' partnership goals. Social support networks, such as fathers' groups, help fathers define their goals and identify strategies for reaching them. They hear how other fathers have overcome challenges in pursuit of their aspirations.

Encourage fathers to share their parenting experiences because many fathers have a goal to improve their relationships with their children.

Promote staff participation in fathers' groups. These are opportune times for staff to strengthen partnerships with fathers. Staff can learn more about fathers' ideas, beliefs, and what is important to them as parents and men.

"I wanted to be a better person and Head Start opened doors for me to become more involved in my child's life. I was able to hear other stories that were similar to mine and that was reassuring. If the stories were different than my experiences, I still learned a lot from them."

– Head Start father







To promote fathers identifying and progressing toward their goals in group settings, incorporate these strategies:

- Partner with fathers to create regular opportunities at convenient times and places to share their knowledge, experiences, and challenges with other fathers.
- Provide safe and inclusive group settings. Invite all fathers, father figures, and male family members.
- Ensure all meetings and activities are culturally and linguistically responsive to fathers. Provide an interpreter if necessary.
- Work with fathers to establish group agreements or ground rules that foster respect for individual differences among the men in the group. Ensure that all discussions are kept confidential.
- Provide training and coaching to staff and fathers to build their skills as group leaders.
- Consider implementing a parenting curriculum that promotes the role of fathers. Engage fathers in reviewing and selecting a curriculum that matches their interests and supports their goals.
- Join with community partners to refer fathers to groups based on their strengths, interests, and needs.
- Be responsive to sub-groups of fathers who may want to meet together. Their mutual interests, such as learning computer skills, or their circumstances, such as fathering a child with disabilities, may draw them together.

As individuals open up and share, support will come from other fathers and men in the group who have had similar experiences. This process takes time, but it can help fathers build relationships with peers and program staff. Family partnerships strengthen when fathers and families connect to sources of peer support.

## Create Community Partnerships

Partner with community organizations to help fathers reach their goals. Community partners may include local businesses, colleges, community colleges, art and music schools, parks and recreation agencies, health and mental health providers, social service agencies, workforce development offices, banks and asset development programs, faith-based groups, schools, libraries, museums, children's theaters, and others. Consider formalizing collaborations with a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Look for community partners who offer welcoming environments to fathers of different ages and backgrounds.



Program leaders and staff can use these strategies to inform and build community partnerships that support fathers' goals:

- Plan regular opportunities, both formal and informal, for staff and fathers to discuss fathers' goals, interests, and needs. Use this information to identify likely community partners.
- Use data from community assessments, program self-assessments, family partnership agreements, and discussions with families to consider potential community partners.
- Invite frequent and open communication with potential and current community partners that focus on fathers.
- Provide warm handoffs as part of community referrals. Introduce fathers to a contact person at the partner organization. Follow up with the father and the contact person about the referral.

Get feedback from community partners and fathers about what services are helpful and effective. Consider ways to strengthen the referral process and service delivery.



## Family Partnerships in Action

Read below about how a family advocate forms a relationship with a father and helps him set his goals.

Joan has been a family advocate in a Head Start program for five years. She shares her experience of partnering with Peter, who lives and works in a community far from his daughter. Peter wanted to move to the community where Jodi, his 4-year-old daughter, lived with her mother. He was thinking about a job transfer, which meant a cut in pay and a change in schedule. His primary goal was to strengthen his family's well-being and contribute financially. While affirming the importance of his relationship with his child, I expected that it would take a while for him to reach his goal of living closer to Jodi. We decided to explore other options besides relocating that would help him maintain a close father-child relationship.



I turned to my supervisor and colleagues for ideas about how to strengthen the father-child bond from his current location. They suggested that Peter regularly use digital technology and video chat to communicate with Jodi. In the past, Sara, the mother, and Peter had a lot of conflict. Sara hadn't encouraged the father-child relationship. Sara and Jodi had been living in a shelter for a while but were able to move out when Peter got a job. More than anything, Sara wanted economic stability.

As the family advocate, I explained to Sara how important it was for Peter to be engaged in his child's life. Although Sara felt anxious about Peter's new plans to move closer, she agreed to set aside a regular time for Jodi and Peter to have video chats. With Sara's permission, the teachers agreed to include Peter in conference calls about Jodi's progress. They said they would send written reports about her progress to Peter. Peter accepted these arrangements.

As Peter and I talked, he decided that he needed time to make a good decision about moving. He realized that economic stability was critical for his family's well-being. He wasn't giving up on his goal of living closer to Jodi, he was just balancing it with other priorities. I realized that I had to keep my eye on this situation because it required commitment and trust from the co-parents whose relationship had been very difficult. I had to maintain a strong, trusting partnership with each parent.

## Reflection

Consider these questions

How does your program develop partnerships with father figures and other males who are raising children?

How does your program partner with fathers to establish goals for themselves and their children? What are the most common goals that fathers select? How do you make sure that goals reflect fathers as individuals?

What are some challenges that staff and fathers face during the family partnership process?

Are the family partnership agreement forms in your program father-friendly? Are they gender neutral? Do they mention activities or interests that might engage males?

## Reflection, cont.

What opportunities do fathers have to participate in group activities and build support networks with other fathers?

How do community partnerships support the strengths, interests, and needs of fathers? Are there any gaps?

## Resources

Explore these resources on the ECLKC.

- [Building Partnerships with Families Series](#)
- [Creating Father-Friendly Environments in Early Childhood Programs](#)
- [The Family Partnership Process: Engaging and Goal Setting with Families](#)
- [Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement for Family Services Professionals](#)

## References

Anderson, S., Aller, T.B., Piercy, K.W., Roggman, L.A. “Helping us find our own selves: Exploring father-role construction and early childhood program engagement.” *Early Child Development and Care*, (2015): 185(3), 360–376.



NATIONAL CENTER ON

---

Parent, Family and Community Engagement