



Birth to 5 Father Engagement Programming Guide

Creating Father-Friendly Environments in Early Childhood Programs



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

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Creating Father-Friendly Environments in Early Childhood Programs

Explore this practical guide to enhance knowledge about effective father engagement strategies. It includes useful tips programs and agencies can apply right away, as well as opportunities for practice and reflection. It is intended for program leaders, staff, parents, and community partners.

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

Review information around the following topics:

- What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?
- The program environment in the PFCE Framework
- Strategies for creating a welcoming environment
 - Provide a welcoming space
 - Respond to diverse cultures, languages, and family arrangements
 - Promote inclusive communications
 - Plan programming designed for fathers and invite their feedback

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 step-father.

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.

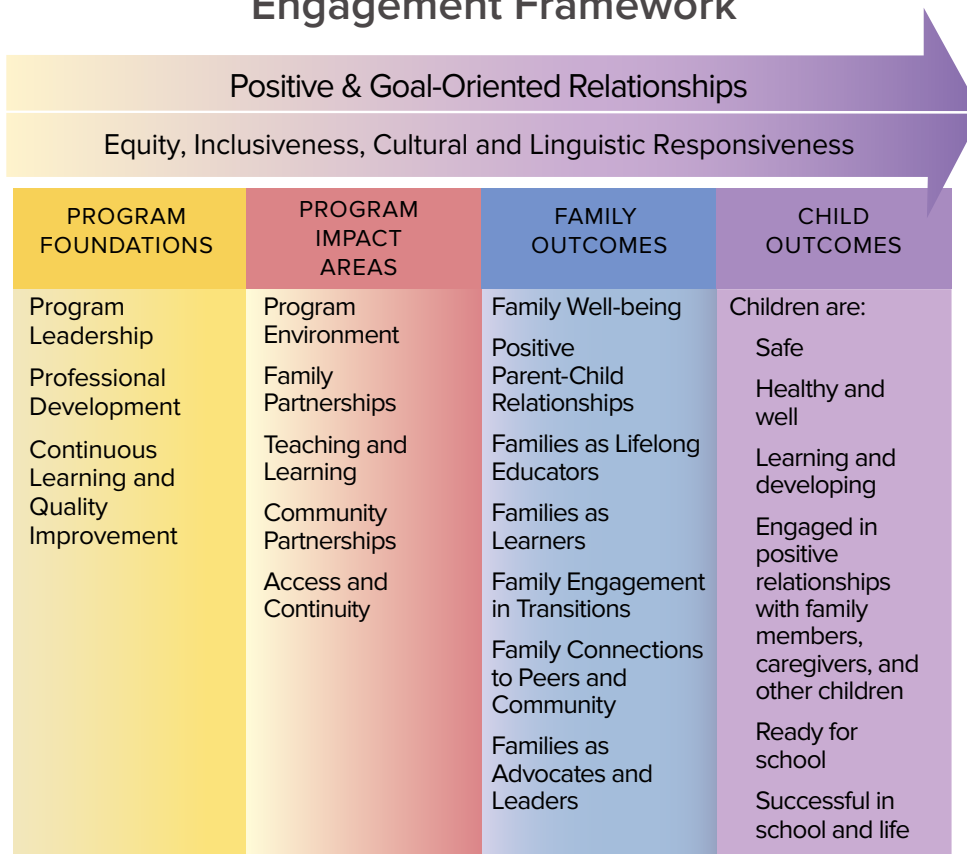
What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?

Families are key to children’s success in school and life. The PFCE Framework provides Head Start and Early Head Start programs with a research-based organizational framework to ensure quality service delivery. It describes the elements (e.g., Program Foundations, Impact Areas) in early learning programs that work together to positively influence family and child outcomes. The Framework identifies equity, inclusiveness, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and positive, goal-oriented relationships as important drivers for these outcomes.

In the PFCE Framework, the Impact Areas are selected service activities that have the greatest influence on family and child outcomes. One of them is the program environment. The strategies an early childhood program uses to create a father-friendly environment can affect fathers’:

- Engagement in their child’s development and learning
- Success in achieving goals for themselves
- Use of community resources

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



What is the program environment?

The program environment consists of its physical features and emotional climate. Together, they affect the interactions and relationships between fathers and staff. The goal is to create a father-friendly environment that reflects their individuality and conveys the message that fathers are important. In this kind of environment, fathers feel welcomed, valued, and respected. A father-friendly environment promotes the well-being, learning, and development of fathers, their families, and their children.



What the Research Says

- The most successful father and male involvement programs create an ongoing “culture of father-friendliness.” This culture is based on staff awareness of the value of a father-friendly atmosphere and the creation of a welcoming environment for fathers as parents. It includes specific activities that engage fathers and father figures in their children’s lives and in the programs that support them (White, Brotherson, Galovan, Holmes, & Kampmann, 2011).
- The quality of fathers’ interactions with practitioners makes a difference. When fathers feel valued, are included in the program, and receive services to develop parenting skills tailored to their needs and goals, they are more engaged in the program and with their young children (Anderson, Aller, Piercy, & Roggman, 2015).

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



Key Points from the Field



Strategies

Provide a Welcoming Space

When a father walks in the classroom and looks around, make sure the room environment conveys this message: “We celebrate fatherhood and fathers here.” —Fatherhood coordinator



Physical Environment

Consider the visible features of the program environment. To make it father-friendly, focus on what fathers can see when they enter a program. Work with parent leaders to ensure the environment invites fathers to engage in activities and interact with their children, other parents, and staff.

Ask the following questions:

- Are there interesting reading materials, photographs, and posters of fathers and other male figures? Are there photos of fathers and their children who are enrolled in your program? Visual materials with a positive message create a feeling of love and possibility. Are there any posters or materials with messages that might not make fathers feel welcome or valued?
- Are there family rooms where fathers and mothers can gather and talk? Can they use computers for job searches? Some programs offer lending libraries with books and toys and spaces where young children can engage in positive interactions with men.
- Are the color schemes, furniture, and other aspects of the physical space appealing to men? Chairs that fit larger frames are useful.



This may seem like a little thing, but it made a big difference in our Early Head Start program. Fathers said they didn’t have a diaper-changing table in their restroom, but mothers did. Why? We installed one and now fathers say they feel welcomed as responsible caregivers. —Program director



Modify how the space is set up for conversations or meetings. Participants in a fatherhood program agreed that thoughtful space arrangements can help them feel considered, included, and not talked down to or judged. They shared their comments and recommendations.

- “We need our personal space, and maybe a little bit more than that, to make sure we feel comfortable.”
- “If furniture is easily moved, you can make adjustments to increase participation.”
- “Conference-style seating at long tables works, where fathers sit across from and next to each other. This makes it easier to engage with each other and the facilitator at our meetings.”
- “Sometimes we had a U shape with the presenter standing toward the front or the middle or even sitting with the fathers. That was key because it made everybody feel they were equal.”

Attitudes and Behaviors

Consider the signs of a welcoming environment that are not so visible, like addressing a father by name. This affirms him as an individual. These signs indicate the attitudes and behaviors directed toward fathers. Each staff member who interacts with families can show fathers that their role is valued. Program directors, home visitors, teachers, transportation staff, nutritionists, and health managers can all have an impact. Fathers feel welcomed when staff get to know them as individuals and as family members. Engaging a nonresident father as a co-parent along with the child’s mother is also an important step.



A welcoming environment is one that allows staff to solve problems together with fathers. Sometimes fathers may miss appointments with staff or bring their child late into the classroom. Staff may think the fathers are not interested in what the program has to offer. In welcoming environments, staff and fathers have respectful conversations that include opportunities to solve transportation, time, or other challenges that may interfere with their own or their child’s participation. When a program partners with fathers, fathers are more likely to feel welcomed and valued.



Strategies That Convey a Welcoming Message to Fathers:

- Include fathers in all family engagement opportunities and activities.
- Schedule meetings when fathers and father figures are available to participate.
- Engage fathers in conversations about their child’s learning and development. Start with your own observations about the child’s progress.
- Acknowledge fathers as nurturers of their child. Recognize that their parenting style may differ from mothers, and that children need to be engaged with both parents.
- Affirm that fathers are experts on their child. Ask fathers how they handle situations with their child, what they observe about their child’s strengths, and what they like to do with their child.
- Invite fathers to give feedback about the program’s physical and emotional environment. What makes them feel welcome? What can be improved?
- Invite open conversations between supervisors and staff and encourage self-reflection that explores hidden assumptions and biases about working with fathers.

In our program, we expect staff to use the same tone in conversations with either mothers or fathers. We also encourage children to share about “daddy and me,” and some create a “daddy and me” journal. We make sure that the idea of daddy can mean any important man in a child’s life, such as a favorite uncle. —Family services worker



Respond to Diverse Cultures, Languages, and Family Arrangements

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



Convey the message that all fathers are valued and included in fatherhood programming. The program may include fathers from a number of different cultures. They may speak different languages. Their ages may vary, and they may be at different stages in their lives. They probably have had different experiences as children and adults. Fathers may live in varied or nontraditional family structures. Some may not live with their child. No matter the family dynamics, fathers have a significant role in their child’s development and learning.

If a program's physical environment reflects the cultures of participating families, everyone will feel more at home. Create a welcoming environment by placing posters and pictures of the families' cultures around the room. Use labels in English and the families' home languages. If staff composition reflects their cultures and languages, that will also help families feel welcomed. When staff do not speak the language, provide interpretation and translation services whenever possible. Encourage staff to learn a few key phrases in each home language, such as "hello," "good morning," "how are you?" "thank you," and "goodbye." They can download OHS's [Ready DLL](#) mobile app to learn key words and phrases in Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, and Haitian Creole.

Fathers feel accepted when staff are open to them, affirm their diversity, and exhibit respectful curiosity about each one as an individual. Part of having an open mind means developing an awareness of one's own attitudes and biases. These tendencies may be based on first impressions of how fathers look, dress, or talk. They may arise from personal experiences with men. Proactive leaders help ensure staff avoid acting on assumptions about fathers. Leaders may consider professional development activities to promote a program-wide culture of inclusiveness and respect for all family members.

Strategies to Build a Climate of Acceptance and Respect for All Fathers and Mothers

- Convey the message that diversity is valued in the program mission statement and other communications.
- Recognize the community's demographics and ensure they are reflected in enrollment data.
- Collect accurate information about the family during the intake process so your program can provide responsive services.
- Focus professional development on the [Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement](#).
- Use resources such as the [Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders](#) during staff training to promote cultural and linguistic responsiveness.
- Ensure all staff recognize fathers and mothers as individuals and demonstrate respect and appreciation for their unique experiences and heritage.
- Provide interpreters at meetings and translations of materials, if necessary, so fathers and mothers can communicate in their preferred language.
- Ask parents and staff for feedback about the program's responsiveness to diverse families. Does everyone feel welcome and valued? What can be improved?

Promote Inclusive Communications

Our program really works on addressing not just the needs of the child but the needs of the whole family. So we try to make sure we talk to both parents in the morning and not just talk to mom and sort of ignore dad off to the side.
—Early Childhood Educator



Make it a priority to communicate with both parents to affirm their roles in their child's life. It should be a program-wide policy and practice. In this way, fathers are acknowledged as co-parents and as individuals with goals and objectives. The benefits of engaging fathers as co-parents extend to them, their families, and their children.

The key to effective communication is knowing fathers as individuals and their unique life circumstances. A father's work schedule, language, cultural expectations about roles in child-rearing, or prior negative experiences in school may pose communication challenges. Some fathers may not be living with their children due to work, military service, incompatibility with the child's mother, or incarceration. There may be unresolved conflicts between the co-parents that inhibit communication. Understanding a father's circumstances allows a program to develop communication strategies that are responsive and individualized.





Strategies to Communicate and Partner with Fathers as Co-parents

- Create forms with spaces for “caregiver” or “parent/guardian” rather than “mother” and “father.” This wording acknowledges that children have families with diverse structures.
- Request father participation to complete intake forms and other materials.
- Prepare message boards that appeal to fathers. Showcase fathers and their children in the program. Use large print and distinguishing colors.
- Ask each parent gender-neutral questions about their child’s other parent, such as “Who are the people in your child’s life who share responsibility for their care?” The message conveyed in this shift of language is one of acceptance, not judgment.
- Ensure family services staff have flexible schedules and appropriate caseloads if your program serves families with a high percentage of nonresident fathers. Staff may need to plan specific communication strategies to reach these fathers.
- Plan home visits when fathers are at home. These are opportunities for staff to know the father, promote his positive relationship with the child, and help him engage in learning experiences with the child.
- Provide regular updates about a child’s progress to co-parents, including nonresidential parents. Invite both to parent-teacher conferences.
- Ask parents to review communication strategies regularly. Find out from them what is effective and what needs to be changed.

When young fathers start to see that staff aren’t making value judgments about them because of their lack of confidence or knowledge or their inability to fulfill the father role as prescribed by society, this relieves a lot of pressure. It allows them to communicate how they actually feel. And that’s the only way you can resolve any of the issues or problems they’re encountering. Communication is key. —Fatherhood coordinator



Plan Programming Designed for Fathers and Invite Feedback

From the beginning of children’s lives, fathers interact differently than mothers do. Not better, not worse, but differently. —Kyle Pruett, Researcher



Taking a strengths-based approach to fatherhood programming means building on what is special about fathers in general and about the fathers in the program. Approaches that appeal to fathers may not appeal to mothers, and vice versa. It is important to get to know the fathers in a program to plan meaningful activities and goal-oriented experiences.

Some activities are likely to appeal to both fathers and mothers. A parenting curriculum offers an opportunity to build their knowledge and practice skills to promote their children’s learning and development. Select a curriculum designed to nurture strong parent-child bonds. Important topics include the unique parenting styles of mothers and fathers, discipline strategies, and child development. Explore resources specifically for fathers. Some are tailored for Spanish-speaking fathers or American Indian fathers. A curriculum for fathers should match typical learning styles for men, too. These kinds of curricula are hands-on, interactive, visually engaging, and create opportunities for nonthreatening discussions.



When men get together, they’ll share stories; but most important is they’ll network and talk to each other about how to resolve conflicts and strategies. I’ve seen them develop a strong network that focuses on parenting, and another network that’s for employment. —Fatherhood coordinator



Consider ways to bring fathers together to connect with each other and with staff. Group activities can support goal-setting and key father engagement outcomes. Groups also provide time for staff to strengthen relationships with fathers and learn more about their ideas, beliefs, and priorities as parents and men. These groups offer an opportunity for staff to hear about fathers’ dreams for their children.

As a program creates a community of support for fathers, consider whether a fathers-only group will work. What topics interest them? What kinds of support do they need from the program and the community? Decisions about programming, format, and composition of fathers' groups have to include input from the fathers themselves. Their voices need to be heard in the planning stage and throughout.

Strategies to Build Successful Father Groups

- Solicit feedback from fathers about their experience in the group.
- Implement fathers' ideas about how to enhance the group experience.
- Establish group rules that foster respect for individual differences among the men in the group.
- Ensure confidentiality about what is shared in groups.
- Plan around fathers' work or school schedules, which may require holding early morning or evening meetings.
- Offer release time to staff to accommodate fathers' schedules.
- Invite knowledgeable fathers and men to address sensitive issues.
- Offer professional development activities to help staff and fathers become skilled facilitators in men's groups.

As they open up and share, support will come from other fathers and men in the group who have “been there and done that.” This process takes time, but it can help fathers deepen their trust with peers and program staff.

Programs can also help mothers understand the importance of fathers in children's well-being. Sharing effective co-parenting strategies may be useful. Assess whether a group for mothers and fathers who are co-parenting could promote positive child and family outcomes.



Program Environment in Action

Read what a former Head Start father, now a fatherhood coordinator, has to say about the importance of a welcoming program environment where fathers' voices are heard.

“Being in a program environment where staff valued my role in my child’s life made all the difference to me. Over and over, they said I knew my child best and I was her first teacher. That gave me the confidence to be able to use the word “love” in the nurturing way that it should be used when taking on that fatherhood role.



There are a lot of conflicting emotions when you’re not able to fulfill that role the way that society wants you to. If you don’t have an outlet to be able to express the kind of feelings that may not be seen as being manly or masculine, then it tends to cause conflict. There is conflict within you as an individual and in relationships with your children and other people.

What’s important is being able to communicate demonstratively about my feelings for my child and how much I care for her. I want her to know that she has a support system within me. This is my goal for the fatherhood groups: Give them a safe place to talk about their feelings. Help them feel comfortable loving their children.”

Reflection

Consider these questions:

How does your program convey that it is a father-friendly environment? Consider space and visual arrangements, staff attitudes and behaviors, communication approaches, and parent activities.

How is the diversity of fathers acknowledged and valued?

How do staff interact with fathers in ways that promote a positive, welcoming environment? Do staff interact equally with mothers and fathers?

What are the strengths of your program environment?

Reflection, cont.

In what ways can you enhance your environment to make it more welcoming?

What opportunities do fathers have in your program to plan and share feedback with staff?

What opportunities do fathers have to discuss topics of interest with each other?

How does your program provide a welcoming atmosphere for co-parents, including nonresidential parents?

Related Resources

Explore these resources to strengthen family and father engagement efforts in your program.

- [Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework](#)
- [Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement](#)
- [Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders](#)
- [The Father Friendly Check-Up™](#)

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