



Birth to 5 Father Engagement Programming Guide

Program Strategies to Maximize Fathers' Connections With Community Partners



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Program Strategies to Maximize Fathers' Connections With Community Partners

Explore this practical guide to learn more about how programs build effective community partnerships to serve fathers in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Reflect on examples and strategies that support positive outcomes for children, families, and fathers.

Fathers and program staff helped develop this guide. It is one in 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:

- What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?
- How do community partnerships support father engagement?

Three program strategies to maximize fathers' connections with community partners are:

- Engage community partners
- Make effective referrals
- Foster father engagement in communities

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.

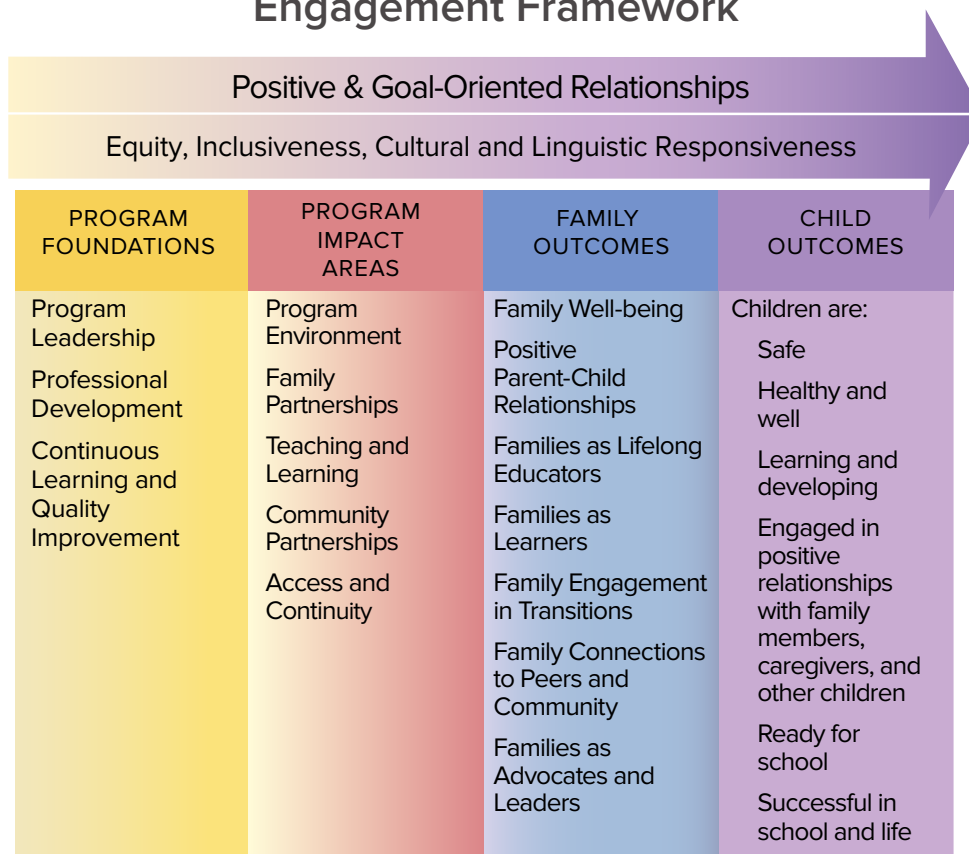
He may be a grandfather, another adult male family member, foster father, guardian, or the mother’s significant other. He may also be the expectant partner of a pregnant woman.

What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?

The Head Start PFCE Framework is a research-based, 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 identifies positive, goal-oriented relationships and equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness as important drivers for these outcomes.

The Framework describes program foundations and impact areas that can promote systemic, integrated, and comprehensive PFCE. The foundations support the impact areas, which are selected service areas with the greatest influence on family outcomes. One impact area, community partnerships, is coordinated with other Framework elements to support effective 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

How Do Community Partnerships Support Father Engagement?

We build relationships with our community partners at every meeting. It's not about who knows more, who's been doing it longer, or who has what funding. It's really about supporting families and how can we best do that together. We want to hear what our partners have to say, even if they disagree with us, because we know that's important in moving us forward. — Head Start director



Head Start and Early Head Start programs do not operate in isolation. They are connected to the communities they serve and to the wider community around them. Programs build collaborative relationships with organizations in the public and private sectors to promote positive and lasting change for children, fathers, and families. These organizations include health and mental health centers, hospitals, schools and school districts, human service agencies, higher education, faith-based organizations, banks and asset development programs, and adult literacy programs. Local businesses can be valuable partners for workforce training and employment opportunities. Other community resources are museums, parks, libraries, and arts education for children.

Strong partnerships with these organizations can help programs respond to fathers' interests and needs, connect them with outside resources, and offer new ways to support father engagement in their children's development. Partnerships can encourage progress toward family outcomes, including family well-being and connections to peers and communities. Partnerships between programs and other service settings, such as child care or public schools, can promote successful transitions for children, families, and fathers. Partnerships also facilitate the coordination of multiple services across agencies.

Leaders and staff can structure community partnerships by supporting:

- **Individual fathers.** Each father has unique goals and action steps identified during the family partnership process. For example, one father turns to a workforce development program, while another seeks housing assistance.
- **All or many fathers in the program.** Fathers may have the same goals, share similar experiences, or speak the same language. For example, a group of expectant fathers takes a parenting program at a local hospital.
- **All or many fathers in the community.** Fathers are diverse, with different ages and backgrounds, but many share interests and goals. For example, residents of a housing project advocate for city funds to build a basketball court where they can set up a youth league.



How Do Community Partnerships Support Father Engagement?

Often programs do not have the internal capacity to go deeper to help parents. This is why we partner. There is and will always be another entity within the community that can enhance our service delivery, regardless of how strong we are. —Fatherhood coordinator



Engaged community partnerships are supportive relationships between programs and other community agencies. Partners value and nurture these relationships and look for ways to strengthen them. The goals of each partner are best met by working with each other. They share leadership and assess effectiveness to inform continuous learning and improve their partnership.

Sometimes partners formalize their relationship with a contract, a letter of agreement, or a memorandum of understanding (MOU). The MOU is designed to support the program's and partner's goals. It spells out shared responsibilities, staffing, lines of communication, budgets, data sharing, and timelines.

Program leaders can establish regular opportunities to discuss partnerships with fathers and staff. Use this time to focus on the program's family engagement goals and the referral process and procedures. Compare the aggregated goals of all fathers in the program with sub-groups of fathers. Are there any sub-groups who don't have equitable access to community resources? Do the community partnerships serve culturally and linguistically diverse fathers? Review the MOUs to keep them current and responsive to fathers and families. Consider whether it's time to develop new MOUs. Ask if the community assessment identifies new partners who can support the program's commitment to fathers.

Strategies to build engaged program-community partnerships include the following:

- Share a common perspective that strengths-based attitudes and relationship-based practices are the foundation for successful father engagement and goal achievement.
- Have a strategy in place that keeps the Head Start fatherhood program at the top of everyone's mind. Ensure current and potential partners know that it is the leading program for fathers of young children.





- Prepare an elevator speech related to father engagement. This is a pitch to prospective partners that summarizes the program’s values and positive outcomes. End with a call to action: “Let’s see how we can work together to boost our success.”
- Engage current and former fathers in the program as fatherhood champions in the community. Turn to community stakeholders, such as agency directors and business owners, to rally community support for fatherhood programs.
- Ensure that all staff communicate the same message about the program’s father-engagement approach. Any contact with a potential parent or partner should highlight the program and its benefits. Written promotional materials can help.
- Invite community service providers to activities for fathers. Include business leaders, faith-based leaders, school board members, government officials, and other community policy leaders. Include representatives from prisons, recovery centers, homeless shelters, and disaster relief services.
- Reach out to community partners to engage their support for activities and campaigns. Seek donations of favorite items for participating fathers, such as tickets to community events, gift cards, and electronic devices. Engage corporate sponsorships to market enhanced services for fathers and create a spirit of community goodwill.
- Explore partnerships with government agencies at the local, state, and federal level. Seek joint funding opportunities.
- Think “outside the box” to develop creative partnerships that address the unique needs of nonresident fathers. Consider partnerships to support fathers who are incarcerated, living in shelters, on a military deployment, or on a job assignment.



An Information Memorandum from the Administration for Children and Families encourages collaboration from all agencies to prioritize father engagement, [ACF-ACF-IM-18-01](#).

Make Effective Referrals

There are all types of fathers who require different approaches — adolescent fathers, military fathers, incarcerated fathers. What can programs do? The family engagement specialist may say, “I can address this, though I feel a little bit uncomfortable.” And that’s where you can connect with the mental health consultant or other staff depending on the father’s issue. They can provide guidance and help you develop a plan for referral. —Fatherhood coordinator



Effective referrals begin with trusting relationships between staff and parents. Get to know fathers’ strengths, their diverse interests and needs, and the challenges they face. Positive relationships help ensure that referrals result in action.

Partner with fathers at every step of the referral process. Set expectations with fathers and community partners. Be aware that some fathers may have had unhappy experiences with social service agencies or educational institutions. They may have been excluded as part of the family unit, or they may not have had access to interpreters. As a result, some fathers may be reluctant to be referred or to follow up. Make it clear that you are their advocate from the beginning to the end of the referral process.



Before referring fathers to an agency, do some homework:

- Know the agency’s processes and how fathers are likely to be treated.
- Consider introducing fathers to agency staff who are known to be father-friendly or whose personal style might be most welcoming to an individual father.
- Work with fathers to anticipate roadblocks and how to work around them.
- Ask if the agency can provide interpretation services, if needed.



During and after the referral process, use these strategies:

- Offer to assist fathers with paperwork required by the agency.
- Help to address transportation issues that might interfere with ongoing agency-father contact.
- Check with individual fathers about whether the referrals are helpful. Include this review as part of the ongoing family partnership process.
- Ask fathers to share positive referrals with other fathers and families.
- Look for successful referrals that can help fathers expand their support network.



Data are key to building strong partnerships. Program leaders can plan to:

- Collect program-wide data on the number of referrals and follow-up activities.
- Ask community partners to identify which of their services are most helpful and effective, and why.
- Assess the impact of the partnerships and their services on family well-being and progress toward the goals of fathers.
- Analyze and aggregate PFCE data into program self-assessment and community assessment.
- Review PFCE program goals on the basis of the data.
- Make decisions about improving MOUs or community partnerships based on the data collected.

Foster Father Engagement in Communities

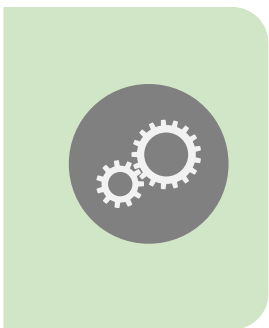
Going to the fathers' support center and going through the fatherhood classes, I realized how important Head Start is to the neighborhood. Some of us want to be leaders for change in our community. —Head Start father



When fathers are engaged in their communities, the result is enhanced connections to peers and the community. Participating in a range of activities and meeting other men can help fathers make progress toward their goals. They can form a support network as they share successes and solve challenges. Among peers, fathers can develop leadership skills, interpersonal and parenting skills, and job skills.

Identify organizations that welcome fathers as mentors or provide mentors to fathers. For example, explore volunteer opportunities with children's arts programs or sports organizations, including Special Olympics, a national program for children with disabilities. Fathers who are skilled at using tools might be interested in helping to rebuild homes. Others that are aware of food insecurity in their community may volunteer at a food bank. When fathers are engaged in community life, they feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Strong father-staff relationships are the foundation for active father participation in communities. Staff know the communities and may be members of the communities they serve. They know the fathers as individuals. They can look for community engagement and leadership opportunities that build on a father's strengths.



Head Start programs are leaders in the community for other organizations interested in becoming more father-friendly. Try these strategies:

- Share materials and ideas for creating welcoming environments in medical clinics, public schools, and other places where fathers go. Seek suggestions from fathers.
- Provide training about the importance of father-child relationships for staff in hospitals and clinics, early learning programs, and other service organizations. Include fathers as trainers.
- Coordinate parenting programs and father-child activities with other early childhood programs, public schools, and agencies serving families. Partner with fathers in planning and implementing these activities.

The result might be to shift community perceptions about the role of fathers, increase support for father engagement, and contribute to common goals across multiple organizations.

As community partnerships that support fathers are solidified, a community-wide network or advisory group might be established. These stakeholders share a commitment to father engagement and can advocate in the community. A network can be a force for change by working to establish father-focused, communitywide standards of practice to share with all family-serving organizations.

Programs can engage with community partners to decide how best to support individual fathers, groups, or all fathers in Head Start and Early Head Start programs, as well as fathers in the wider community. When programs and agencies collaborate, they enhance the ways that fathers and their families access and experience services.



Community Partnerships in Action

Explore this scenario in which a fatherhood coordinator describes the process of and the reason for community outreach:

“We have a large program, and a few years ago we asked ourselves, ‘How many of our community partners know about our work with fathers?’ We looked at our community assessment data and found that the answer was, plain and simple, ‘Not enough.’ It’s like we were a well-kept secret, and that really didn’t make sense. We want folks to be aware of what we offer.



Now our program’s focus is on building a strong community network with fathers as active participants. During meetings with prospective community partners, we invite fathers to stand up and talk about how Head Start has affected them in a positive way. Many fathers talk about their improved relationship with their child. They talk about how the parenting curriculum has connected them to other parents. It’s taught them about discipline techniques and how they can help their children get ready for school. Instead of thinking that only mothers can take care of babies, a lot of fathers are very engaged in everyday caregiving. They brag about how they know how to change diapers! Some fathers talk about how their relationship with the co-parent has improved. Fathers give testimony about how, because of Head Start, they are on track to finish their education and get a job. The fathers are so proud of their accomplishments!

The message that fathers share resonates with the community stakeholders. It touches them emotionally to see that Head Start is really doing tremendous work. When the fathers talk, they open up the mindset of the partners and inspire them to think of new possibilities for collaboration.”

Reflection

Consider these questions:

What is your program's current community engagement approach?

How does the program work with community partners to address fathers' and families' goals and interests?

How are the community services and resources culturally and linguistically responsive to individual fathers and sub-groups of fathers in your program?

How are data collected and used to improve the partnerships and their service delivery?

What are the desired outcomes and results from the partnerships?

What are some new strategies that could enhance the community engagement efforts?

Resources

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

- [Bringing Families Together: Building Community](#)
- [Effective Community Engagement: The Vision Ahead](#)
- [Engaging Community Partners to Strengthen Family Services](#)
- [Family and Community Partnerships for School Readiness](#)
- [Head Start Parent Family, and Community Engagement \(PFCE\) Framework](#)
- [Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Partnerships](#)
- [Healing and Supporting Fathers: Principles, Practices, and Resources for Fatherhood Programs to Help Address and Prevent Domestic Violence](#)
- [Integrating Approaches That Prioritize and Enhance Father Engagement](#)
- [Partnerships for Change: Listening to the Voices of Families](#)
- [Supporting Children Through Public Library Partnerships](#)

References

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *Integrating approaches that prioritize and enhance father engagement*, (ACF-ACF-IM-18-01). Washington, DC, 2018.



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