



## Birth to 5 Father Engagement Programming Guide

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# Strategies for Program Leaders to Support Father Engagement



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## Strategies for Program Leaders to Support Father Engagement

Explore this practical guide to deepen knowledge and expand leadership practices related to father engagement in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. It includes useful tips that directors, managers, and parent leaders can apply right away. It also includes opportunities for practice and reflection.

Fathers and 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 in early childhood programs.

Review information around the following topics:

- What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?
- How can program leaders support father engagement?
  - Prioritize program-wide father engagement
  - Plan staffing to support father engagement goals and objectives
  - Strengthen fathers' connections to community resources and peers

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.

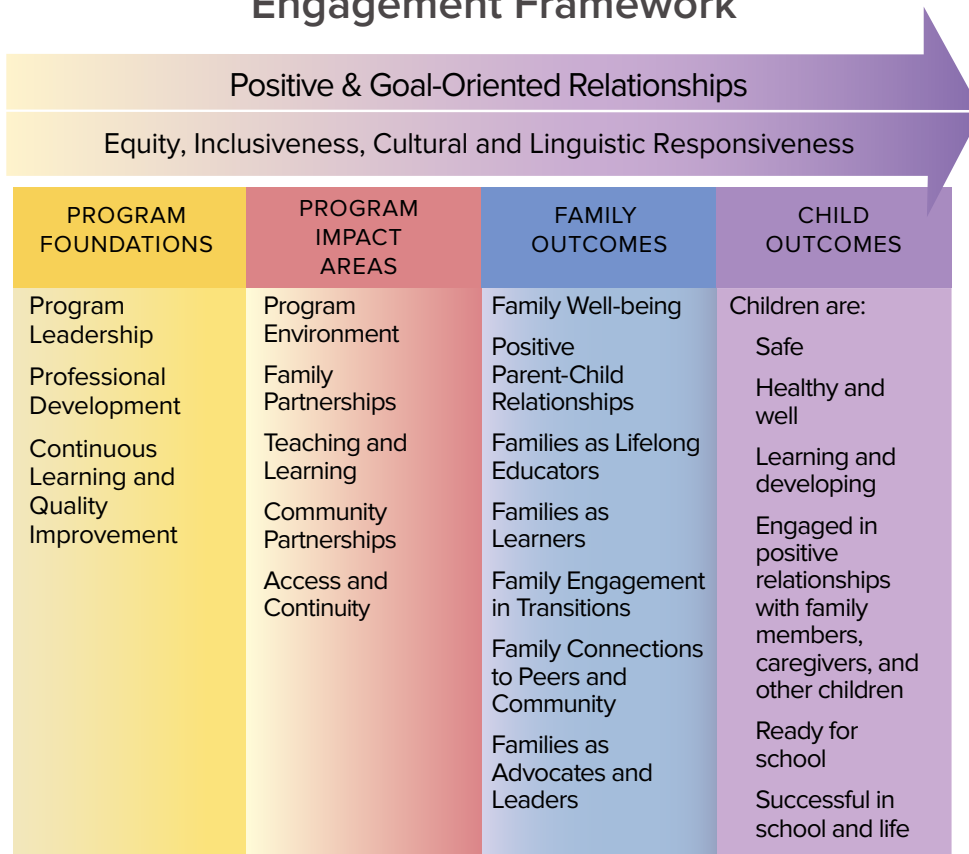
He may be a grandfather, another adult male family member, foster father, guardian, or the mother's significant other. He may be the expectant partner of a pregnant woman.

## What is the Head Start PFCE Framework?

The PFCE Framework is an organizational guide for collaboration among families, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and community service providers. It promotes positive, enduring outcomes for children and families. It describes the elements (e.g., Program Foundations, Impact Areas) in early learning programs that can work together to positively influence child and family outcomes. The Framework identifies equity, inclusiveness, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and positive, goal-oriented relationships as important drivers for these outcomes.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs need strong program foundations that work together to create lasting change for families and children. Program Leadership is one of the PFCE Framework program foundations.

### 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 can program leaders support father engagement?

You need everybody as a leader. In our program, we have to make sure that every person is ready and able to lead as much as possible.  
—Head Start director



Program leaders, including agency or program directors and parent leaders, set expectations and model effective PFCE practices. They collaborate with managers, staff, parents, and community stakeholders to set a clear vision and establish program goals. Leaders make sure policies, operational procedures, and program practices actively promote PFCE, including father engagement.

The responsibilities of leaders include planning, budgeting, hiring, and revising policies and procedures to promote positive father, family, and child outcomes. They value staff collaboration across content areas and multidisciplinary teams to make sure responsive and coordinated PFCE approaches are in place.

Leaders make it clear that it is the shared responsibility of all program staff to create a healthy, welcoming environment for all family members. They advocate for the inclusion of diverse family voices at all program levels, from governance groups to teacher-family conferences. Leaders also support efforts to partner with families in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive.





## Prioritize Program-wide Father Engagement

We often times feel very comfortable that we have all the answers and that we want to provide some leadership in where the program is going. Let's try to make sure that we empower fathers so that they have an opportunity to be an integral part of our program plans. —Fatherhood coordinator



Communicate to all staff, families, and community stakeholders that your organization is father friendly. Make it clear that your program is committed to building partnerships with fathers and they are welcome in all program activities. Experienced program leaders nurture new leaders by being open to new ideas and encouraging active participation. Keep an eye out for fathers who have the skills and interest to take on leadership roles.

Step back and take a “big picture” view of your program. Look across systems to ensure they work together to inform and influence quality service delivery to children and families. Use data from the self-assessment and community assessments to guide decision-making. Monitor program quality. Ask, “Do the services support our program’s vision and goals for community, parent, and father engagement?” Consult with other leaders, staff, parents, and community members to ask where improvements are needed and what they recommend.



In collaboration with program staff, parents, and community partners, program leaders should address all of the PFCE Framework elements to create and maintain a father-friendly organization. Program leaders can prioritize father engagement in many ways.



### **Professional Development**

- Support a coordinated approach for the program’s training and professional development system. Ensure the system supports positive, culturally responsive family and father engagement practices.
- Affirm the role of fathers in their child’s development during staff training.
- Plan professional development opportunities for staff, parent leaders, and fathers with a focus on areas of interest to fathers.
- Offer staff development and reflective practice opportunities to address biases and attitudes that interfere with building positive staff-father relationships.

### **Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement**

- Ensure father-friendly spaces with welcoming pictures, materials, and furniture.
- Welcome diverse cultures, languages, and family arrangements.
- Promote inclusive communication. Use gender-neutral forms for information about parents without reference to mothers or fathers. Request information about non-residential parents.
- Include fathers in communications about the child and invite them to teacher-parent conferences.
- Ensure flexible staff schedules if needed to accommodate fathers’ availability for meetings.
- Plan program activities designed for fathers and invite their feedback.

### **Program Environment**

- Ensure father-friendly spaces with welcoming pictures, materials, and furniture.
- Welcome diverse cultures, languages, and family arrangements.
- Promote inclusive communication. Use gender-neutral forms for information about parents without reference to mothers or fathers. Request information about non-residential parents.
- Include fathers in communications about the child and invite them to teacher-parent conferences.
- Ensure flexible staff schedules if needed to accommodate fathers’ availability for meetings.
- Plan program activities designed for fathers and invite their feedback.

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



### **Family Partnerships**

- Emphasize the development of positive staff relationships with fathers that focus on their goals for their children, their families, and themselves.
- Implement policies and procedures to include fathers in the family partnership process.
- Show respect for the diversity of fathers’ experiences and their goals.
- Consider a parenting curriculum that recognizes the unique role of fathers in their child’s life.

### **Teaching and Learning**

- Encourage staff to plan activities for fathers—and mothers—that strengthen the parent-child connections.
- Value the information and knowledge parents have about their child.
- Expect staff to share ongoing assessment data with families, including nonresidential parents.
- Promote father engagement in activities to prepare children for the transition to kindergarten.

### **Community Partnerships**

- Partner with community organizations and look for opportunities to extend community services for fathers.
- Invite current and former fathers to contact community partners they know.
- Develop networks, peer-to-peer groups, and volunteer opportunities that support fathers’ goals and strengthen connections to other fathers and community resources.

### **Access and Continuity**

- Emphasize the importance of recruiting fathers and inviting their participation in the program.
- Support the staff responsible for enrolling families to ensure they make outreach efforts where fathers live and work.
- Build collaborations across organizations to ensure continuity of service delivery for fathers and their families.



## Plan Staffing to Support Father Engagement Goals

As professionals, teachers, family service workers, we often don't give men enough space to engage with their children in meaningful ways. We're socialized to be the caretakers, and we have to learn that dads have important roles. —Early Head Start director



### Offer professional development opportunities aligned with staff needs.

Use data from the program self-assessment and individual professional development plans to identify staff learning needs. For programs in the early stages of promoting father engagement or with limited resources, prioritize building staff competencies. Focus on creating staff awareness of fathers' importance in their child's development. Use staff training and reflective supervision to enhance communication and relationship-building skills with fathers. Provide safe learning environments for staff to examine their biases and stereotypes that may affect their interactions with fathers.

Family advocates and education staff are typically involved in professional development. They receive oversight and support from program administrators. Involve all staff, volunteers, consultants, and fathers in training activities when possible. Father engagement is everyone's business.



### Ensure hiring practices attract male staff.

Review hiring policies and staffing patterns. Are there male teachers and home visitors who can relate to fathers and who can model male-child interactions? Are there male staff who help recruit families and engage them in program activities? Do male staff reflect the diverse ages, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and competencies of the fathers in the program?

### Create a fatherhood team of staff and parents.

Utilize the team to plan and manage father-specific programming, such as fathers' groups and father-child activities. Support their selection of a parenting curriculum that affirms the role of fathers in family and child well-being. Ensure all family structures are valued, especially co-parents and nonresidential fathers. Fathers can develop leadership skills when they serve on the team.

## Define a position for a father engagement coordinator.

Job responsibilities may include engaging directly with fathers as well as promoting staff competence to work with fathers. Bring on new staff for this specific role or include these responsibilities within an existing role. The position is usually part of the family services team and involves working across multi-disciplinary teams. Give priority to current or past fathers in the program who may have a unique perspective to bring to the staff position. Include qualifications that emphasize relationship-building skills. Develop a job description with input from the human resources team, managers, staff, and parents.



## Leadership Strategies to Support a Fatherhood Team or Coordinator

- Make it clear to all staff that the team or coordinator's work is connected to the program's PFCE goals and continuous improvement efforts.
- Ensure the fatherhood team or coordinator collaborates with other staff, including the management team.
- Encourage the fatherhood team or coordinator to reach out to nonresident fathers and discuss service delivery and referrals with them.
- Promote discussions between the team or coordinator and education staff and home visitors. Highlight the importance of father engagement in children's learning and effective strategies to strengthen father-child connections.
- Allocate funds in the budget for the fatherhood coordinator position and identify external funding sources, including foundations and government agencies.

“Program leaders in home visiting programs spoke about the importance of finding the right person to fill the position of fatherhood coordinator and about the difficulties when the wrong person was employed. What distinguished the right coordinator from the wrong coordinator were his relationships, both with the men in the program more narrowly and with the community more broadly.”  
—Sandstrom et al, 2015



## Strengthen Fathers' Connections to Community Resources and Peers

As a program leader, become familiar with [ACF-ACF-IM-18-01 Integrating Approaches that Prioritize and Enhance Father Engagement](#). The Information Memorandum (IM) strongly encourages all human service agencies, including Head Start programs, to work together across governments to jointly create an environment that prioritizes father engagement as a critical factor in strengthening families. It recommends adopting approaches to enhance paternal involvement in all family support and child welfare-related programs. The IM also describes father engagement in several federal programs.

Look for opportunities to develop and maintain effective partnerships with community leaders and organizations. Collaborate with all stakeholders to ensure effective planning and communication that results in positive outcomes for children, families, and fathers. Programs can build partnerships that support individual fathers, all fathers, sub-groups of fathers in the program, or many fathers in the community.

One of the most important connections program leaders can make is with the local school district. There are many options for Head Start collaborations with receiving schools. Collaboration can result in joint professional development, sharing information about curricula, and family and child visits to the new school. Work closely with school leaders, including the superintendent and principals, to make transition plans. Engage the whole family in the child's move to kindergarten. Help them understand what the expectations are in kindergarten and what the setting is like. Support the role of both parents as their child's lifelong educational advocate.





## Leadership Strategies to Strengthen Community Partnerships

- Use the community assessment to identify and review existing partnerships and memoranda of understanding (MOUs).
- Consider whether new MOUs are needed. Meet with local organizations and school leaders to learn about their mission, history, and requirements. Identify shared goals and opportunities for collaboration and partnerships with fathers.
- Use program goals and self-assessment data to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement related to father engagement and community partnerships. Talk with fathers and parent leaders about their experiences.
- Offer to pool resources with community partners when additional space, transportation, interpretation, or other resources are needed for fatherhood groups, father-child activities, or recruitment and enrollment efforts.
- Plan joint staff training across agencies to ensure a seamless approach to working with fathers.
- Think broadly about the range of resources needed for fathers and families, such as physical and mental health services, housing and food assistance, financial counseling, job preparation, and language instruction.
- Encourage community partners to participate in program activities, including Policy Council.
- Ensure community representatives on the Health Services Advisory Committee are knowledgeable about men's health and mental health.
- Explore creative collaborations to fill funding gaps in services and supports for fathers.
- Collect success stories from staff and fathers. Ask fathers to share their stories; often, they are the most persuasive community builders.

When a local industry closed down, many fathers lost their jobs. They were very stressed and worried about how to support their families. They had few options around here. Our program had to reach out and build new community partnerships. We turned to the local workforce development office and together, we came up with some new vocational training ideas. — Head Start director



## Leadership Strategies to Strengthen Peer Relationships



- Identify opportunities for fathers to build relationships with other fathers and community mentors. Both can be sources of support and expertise.
- Connect with social, cultural, and musical groups that might appeal to fathers' interests and talents. Encourage participation in:
  - Men's groups
  - Mentoring initiatives
  - Faith-based initiatives
  - Sports and recreation leagues
  - Parent organizations
  - Family restoration and strengthening projects
  - Marriage and relationship education
  - Crime prevention services
- Identify parenting organizations and other resources that offer parent-child activities, such as family literacy fairs and museum events.



## Program Leadership in Action

Explore the scenario and reflect on opportunities for leaders to emphasize father engagement.

Ben Gonzalez is a Head Start director. He wants to promote father engagement in his program. The program self-assessment is the catalyst that propels Ben into action. Staff-parent communication is rated low. Parents, especially fathers, describe challenges related to their experiences with pick-up and drop-off. A number of fathers feel disrespected and angry at pick-up because center staff won't send the children home with them. These fathers are listed on the emergency contact card. There is no history of domestic violence or child abuse. However, due to conflicts between the mother and father, the mothers have asked that the children not be sent home with the fathers. Fathers feel their rights are being denied.



This raises challenges for staff who want to preserve their relationship with each parent. Trust between fathers and staff has been weakened. Relationships that used to be positive are now strained.

As the program leader, Ben takes responsibility for ensuring father engagement is a program-wide priority. He wants to make sure he is up to date. He decides to:

- Share IM 18-01 at the next staff meeting because it is a strong statement about the importance of father engagement.
- Join the PFCE Deepening Practice community on [MyPeers](#), a forum where he can ask questions and get advice from fellow program staff.

To ensure all staff are aligned, Ben forms a team composed of program managers, staff, and family members. They establish priorities and a timeline.

First, they revisit program practices and policies about pick-up and drop-off. The team:

- Prepares an immediate memo for staff and parents indicating, first and foremost, how much the program values its relationships with all parents. It includes the program policy to allow either parent to drop off or pick up their child when they are on the emergency contact list and there is no risk of harm.
- Joins Ben at a staff meeting and at a parent meeting to reiterate this message and answer questions or concerns.



## Program Leadership in Action, cont.

The team also makes long-term plans to improve service delivery to parents.

They decide to:

- Assess the program environment to ensure it is father friendly.
- Plan professional development to enhance the relationship-based practices of staff and their interactions with families.
- Identify a parenting curriculum that offers strategies for co-parenting.
- Review MOUs to ensure partnerships are in place to help fathers reach their goals.
- Continue to monitor the program's PFCE efforts by engaging in frequent and open conversations with staff and families.

After a few months of tireless but satisfying work to resolve a challenging situation, Ben feels energized and confident. Under his leadership as director, the program has taken actions to ensure mothers and fathers are respected and valued as co-parents. He has also created a staff-parent team to ensure parent and father engagement is a program priority.



## Reflection

Consider these questions:

Who are the leaders in your program? Do they champion PFCE?

Is father engagement prioritized by program leaders? How do you know?

How do program leaders make decisions about when, how, and where to promote father engagement?

What data are used to guide decision-making? Are the data adequate? Are all stakeholders' voices heard, including parents, staff, and community partners?

Are fathers visible in the program? Are they employees and in what capacity?

## Reflection, cont.

Do program leaders have a vision to initiate or expand father engagement efforts? What would it take to implement? Consider options such as additional funding, new or revised MOUs, hiring more staff, or professional development activities.

## References

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *ACF-ACF-IM-18-01 Integrating Approaches that Prioritize and Enhance Father Engagement*. 2018. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/im/acf-acf-im-18-01>
- Sandstrom, H.; M. Gearing, E. Peters, C. Heller, O. Healy, and E. Pratt. *Approaches to Father Engagement and Fathers' Experiences in Home Visiting Programs*. OPRE Report No. 2015–103. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.



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