

# **Community of Practice: Engaging At-Risk Fathers in Home Visiting Services**

*Effects on Program Retention and Father Involvement*

**May 4, 2021 at 3:00 pm**

Notes for HF Jefferson Slides

# Father Involvement

- Healthy Families Jefferson came along 10 years after Healthy Families New York launched the Fatherhood component.
  - Since we have only been partnering with families for about four years, we do not have “before” and “after” data for comparison.
- However, this chart (slide 20) shows our average father involvement since we began partnering with families in 2017, as well as the year before COVID and a year of COVID.
- We actually thought MORE fathers were involved in visits during the past year. However, the data indicates less were.
  - We think some of this is because it is more challenging to engage multiple caregivers on virtual visits than in-person (e.g., when families are using their cell phone, it can be hard to get multiple caregivers and children on the video call).
  - We continued to engage fathers in other means, such as through text check-ins, but we do not track those.
    - Our data system does not track or measure these types of informal engagements.
- When we include “father figures,” participation rates are higher.

# Getting Everyone on Board

- Set the expectations for staff.
  - During supervision, be sure to specifically ask about fathers.
    - E.g., What questions did the home visitor ask dad during the visit? How did he respond?
    - E.g., If dad wasn't at the visit, did the home visitor ask mom questions about dad?
  - Use team meetings to share ideas for what has worked and what has not worked.
  - Help staff learn and understand the benefits of engaging with fathers. Learn about the dynamics of culture, race, gender, and socio-economic conditions.
- Set the expectations for families.
  - Beginning at the scheduling of the first visit, be sure to ask when is good for mom and dad to participate.
  - Try to make sure mom and dad understand that you want them both to be involved in the visits.
  - If dad misses a visit, check in to ask why and encourage his participation at the next one.
  - If mom can't participate, don't cancel the visit, but instead normalize it being ok that it can be just dad.

# Promote Fathers

- Ensure that you're using father specific language and materials.
  - Specifically mention fathers, including on forms and paperwork.
  - Ask for father information. (e.g., If you're asking something from mom, why wouldn't you ask the same from dad?)
  - Show fathers in images. Some materials, social media posts, or conversations should ONLY focus on dads, so they do not feel as if they're just an "add-on," "back-up," or "after-thought."
  - Be mindful that some programs are only designed for mothers and babies, or have female connotations (e.g., Women, Infants, and Children—WIC, or Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting—MIECHV). Explore if that might be preventing fathers from participation.
- Make sure to get to know who the fathers you are working with really are. Do not assume. Ask them what they value, what they want for their child, what kind of dad they want to be, what kind of father figure they had growing up, what's important to them, how they think others view their role as dad.
- Our society, through traditional media and social media, often portrays fathers less than ideally...deadbeats or absent, goofs, "babysitters," "baby-daddies," Be aware of gender-role stereotypes.
  - Make sure these perceptions aren't creeping into your work and creating barriers.

# Recognize and Share Benefits

- Come prepared to visits with father specific data.
  - There is a lot of research showing better outcomes when dads are involved.
    - E.g., dad is healthier and happier.
    - E.g., kids are happier; boys experience less behavior challenges and girls tend to be more confident.
    - E.g., moms feel stronger and more secure when supported; higher likelihood for breastfeeding when dad is supportive.
    - E.g., family has more economic stability.
      - Here in Jefferson County, 15.5% of females live in poverty. For families with female heads of household and children present, nearly 42% live in poverty.

# Recognize and Support Challenges

- Generally, fathers have historically taken on a different role in families.
  - Historically speaking, gender roles such as the father being the “bread winner” while mom “takes care of the kids and house.”
- Males have typically been parented differently.
- Fathers may want to be involved but are prevented from doing so.
  - Moms being “gate-keepers,” not allowing fathers to see their children.
  - Courts may revoke custody if dad has criminal history or is behind on child support.
- Males experience adversity and traumatic events differently.
  - 3 out of 5 men have experienced or witnessed at least one traumatic event.
    - Often reluctant to seek help because of stereotypes.
    - Fathers suffering from the effects of trauma may disconnect or withdraw from daily interactions with their child and parenting responsibilities.
- There are not a lot of male professionals in the field to support fathers.
  - In Healthy Families New York, there are around 500 employees, with less than 10 being male.
- Explore with staff the feelings they might have with engaging males and if those feelings create barriers or challenges.

# Resources

- How the Pandemic is Strengthening Fathers' Relationships with Their Children
  - <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/how-the-pandemic-is-strengthening-fathers-relationships-with-their-children>
- National Fatherhood Initiative
  - <https://www.fatherhood.org/>
- National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse
  - <https://fatherhood.gov/>
- Trauma Informed Approaches and Awareness for Programs Working with Fathers
  - [https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/resource\\_files/e000004132.pdf](https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/resource_files/e000004132.pdf)