



Case Study of Father Engagement in Healthy Start Programs

Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition Fatherhood PRIDE

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Program: Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition Fatherhood PRIDE

Program type: Healthy Start/ fatherhood program

Geographic area: Northeast Florida (Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau, and St. Johns Counties)

Setting: One community-based office and five correctional facilities

Focal population: Fathers in the broader community (50 percent) and incarcerated fathers (50 percent)

Number of participants served: About 300 fathers per year

Initial year of operation: 2015

Main funding source: The Florida Healthy Start Coalition is funded by the Florida Department of Health and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration. It has also received HHS's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grant funding to deliver fatherhood services.

Primary curricula used: 24/7 Dad and InsideOut Dad

Introduction

Since 2015, the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition (HSC) has offered its Fatherhood Parental Responsibility Inspiring Dads Everywhere (Fatherhood PRIDE) program to complement the services it offers to mothers and children. Fatherhood PRIDE and HSC aim to reduce infant mortality rates and improve the lives of pregnant women and their families. Although HSC member programs typically focus on mothers and children, Fatherhood PRIDE emphasizes the role of fathers in the family. Fatherhood PRIDE believes that a father's physical and emotional presence in his children's lives is as important to the family's well-being as his financial contributions. By including fathers in HSC services through Fatherhood PRIDE, the coalition can holistically address the family to support its mission of improving the well-being of children, childbearing women, fathers and their families. This case study highlights Fatherhood PRIDE's approach to recruiting, enrolling, and retaining fathers through father-specific engagement strategies, partnerships with key systems serving fathers, and an intake process that leverages fathers' existing social networks and supports.

Father engagement refers to the purposeful inclusion of fathers (including biological, social, resident, nonresident, and stepfathers) in program services and activities with the objective of improving outcomes for fathers, children, and families. Strategies to promote father engagement may include recruiting, enrolling, and maintaining active participation of fathers in programming, involving fathers in policy and program development, and integrating fathers into program operations.

In this case study, we focus on how a Healthy Start Coalition developed a fatherhood program—Fatherhood PRIDE—that reaches and enrolls fathers in services that complement the objectives of the Healthy Start Coalition.

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Program Overview

Fatherhood PRIDE's goal is to strengthen and expand fatherhood programming, financial literacy, employment, housing, health care, mentoring, and recidivism reduction services through case management, group parenting classes, and referrals. Eighty percent of the fathers served by Fatherhood PRIDE who reside in the community are referred from the local child support agency or family court, while the remaining 20 percent are referred from the local child welfare agency or are self-referred. Fatherhood PRIDE also serves about 150 incarcerated fathers from five local correctional facilities in northeast Florida. Fatherhood PRIDE has been intentional about how they recruit and connect with fathers who reside in the community and has modified their strategies to increase engagement and participation in the program.

Since 1991, the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition has promoted positive outcomes for mothers and their children as part of a statewide network of community-based organizations. Although the coalition primarily serves new and expectant mothers, it began serving fathers in 2015 through its Fatherhood PRIDE program.

Enhance engagement by emphasizing a separate focus on fathers

As an organization that predominantly provides services for mothers, the HSC wanted to ensure that fathers felt that they are a valued part of the family and the coalition. When Fatherhood PRIDE began, the program was physically located in the HSC building. Recently, Fatherhood PRIDE created a father-friendly office space separate from the main HSC building to signal to fathers that they are deserving of their own program with their own space. The Fatherhood PRIDE office is decorated with images of fathers and posters with quotes from fathers. The office also provides information and brochures about services specifically for fathers. This creates an environment where fathers feel welcome and can relate to the materials. Staff reported that the father-focused environment has increased fathers' engagement with the program, which ultimately increases the potential for positive outcomes for the fathers and their families.

Go to where the fathers are

Fatherhood PRIDE has worked to reach fathers who may be interested in its services but are unfamiliar with the program. For example, fathers often accompany mothers and children to the HSC office, but they do not enter the building themselves. So, Fatherhood PRIDE staff go to the HSC building parking lot to speak with fathers waiting outside the building and introduce them to the fatherhood program.

Despite the physical separation of its programs, Fatherhood PRIDE maintains a close connection with its HSC partners to support their common goal of supporting the whole family. Fatherhood PRIDE staff participate in monthly HSC staff meetings for updates on other programs and seek opportunities for referrals from HSC programs. They also collaborate with other HSC programs to encourage them to include information on fatherhood in their programs, show images of fathers in the HSC building, and include fathers in HSC programs.

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Develop partnerships with key systems serving fathers to promote engagement

Developing partnerships is important for promoting father engagement in programs across practice fields. These partnerships can be developed intentionally based on the goals of the programs and the needs of fathers. Partners can refer participants to programs for services or be direct service providers themselves. As one example, Fatherhood PRIDE developed a partnership with the local child support agency to be a referral source to the program. In turn, Fatherhood PRIDE developed partnerships with other organizations that could address the child support–related needs that these fathers might have.

Fathers involved with the child support system may be required to participate in fatherhood or employment programs to (1) satisfy court requirements to avoid penalties for noncompliance with child support orders and (2) to improve their ability to pay child support. Fatherhood PRIDE developed an agreement with the local child support program for its staff to attend child support–related court hearings twice a week. If a father is ordered to enter a fatherhood or employment program during the hearing, the judge can direct the fathers to the Fatherhood PRIDE representative at court for immediate engagement.

Because the child support program serves as a main referral source for Fatherhood PRIDE, nearly 80 percent of fathers in the program are involved with the child support system. To meet the needs of these fathers, Fatherhood PRIDE maintains relationships with organizations that help fathers navigate that system and increase their ability to pay child support. Fatherhood PRIDE refers fathers to community resources such as the Family Law Library and Legal Aid to help fathers understand their rights, assist with driver’s license suspensions, and file petitions for parenting time.

Improving fatherhood skills, increasing access to children, and increasing fathers’ ability to provide support for their children can lead to improved cognitive and behavioral outcomes for children.¹ Moreover, connecting fathers with enhanced child support services can improve children’s access to health care coverage, which can improve health outcomes for children.² Thus, the child support partnership is important for helping the HSC achieve its mission.

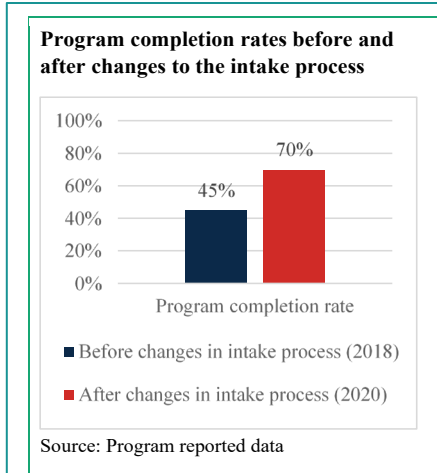
Leverage targeted enrollment and social supports to improve ongoing participation

To increase participation and program completion, Fatherhood PRIDE modified its intake process in two ways. First, prior to 2018, Fatherhood PRIDE enrolled any father that expressed interest in the program. After 2018, the intake worker would explain the time commitment and expectations for participation in the program before enrollment. If the father indicated that he could not meet the time commitments and expectations, staff encouraged him to return when he could do so.

“Our most successful strategy is not just enrolling every dad we get a referral for. We changed the intake strategy to assess a father’s commitment to completing the program and achieving his goals. Our enrollment suffered [initially] but participation skyrocketed.”
– Staff member on changes to the intake structure to improve participation

Second, during the intake process, intake workers began asking fathers to identify important members of their support network—for example, family, friends, and neighbors—who could help the fathers achieve their goals in the program. With the fathers’ permission, staff then contact the individuals and ask that they support the father by reminding him when classes are scheduled, providing transportation as needed, and encouraging him to complete the program. Staff find that family and friends are consistently willing to help and that fathers respond positively to this as evidenced by increased participation rates.

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Fatherhood PRIDE reported that engagement in its program increased after these changes to the intake process, without sacrificing the number of fathers served. From 2015-2020, Fatherhood PRIDE consistently served approximately 300 fathers per year through its ACF grant. Before the changes (in 2018), however, fathers completed only 17.5 hours of the 30 hours of programming on average. In addition, only 45 percent of the fathers completed the program. After the changes (in 2020), fathers completed 29.7 hours of the programming on average and 70 percent completed the program. Because fathers were more engaged and committed to the program, facilitators also reported that the conversations in classes were more positive and productive.

Lessons and considerations

The experience of HSC and Fatherhood PRIDE offers lessons for how human service programs can improve father engagement and promote positive family and child outcomes.

Emphasize a father focus by including programs that support fathers

Programs that are not designed to offer father-focused services can collaborate or partner with father-focused programs to reach fathers, increase their engagement, and promote positive outcomes for the whole family. Traditionally, HSC's mission led to mother-focused programming. Rather than shift its program focus, HSC increased father engagement by adding a fatherhood program to its network of programs to fill an important gap in services.

Capture a father's motivation to participate during the intake process

Programs may consider adapting their intake processes to include a formal assessment of a father's motivation, willingness, and ability to engage in the program prior to enrollment. This will increase the likelihood of enrolling fathers who will attend and participate in the program and who will achieve the program's intended goals. Programs can also use the information about a father's motivation to inform their decisions about how to best allocate staff time and resources. Participants with high levels of motivation who have easier access to the program may require less-intensive staff interactions to encourage participation than participants with lower levels of motivation and access.

Tap into a father's social network to increase his participation

Programs can proactively engage fathers' family and social networks during the intake process to promote engagement and program completion. Individuals from these support systems can encourage fathers to attend classes and engage with the program material, and they can help reduce barriers—for example, lack of transportation or child care—that the fathers may face when attempting to access services. An engagement strategy that leverages a father's social network can motivate and support him as he completes the program and achieves the desired outcomes.

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This case study is part of a series of three case studies that showcase how select programs implement father engagement strategies. Each case study highlights key programmatic elements of father engagement and shares lessons learned to expand the knowledge of programs working to improve child and family well-being. The study is sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The authors thank our project officers Amanda Benton, Pamala Trivedi, Matthew Cournoyer, and Emily Hopkins for their valuable guidance and contributions to this case study.

Endnotes

¹ Amato, P. R., and J. G. Gilbreth. "Nonresident Fathers and Children's Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 61, no. 3, 1999, pp. 557–573.

² Murphy, D. (2017). Research Brief: Health Insurance Coverage Improves Child Well-Being. Bethesda, MD.