

## Issue Brief

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# Strategies for Promoting Racial Equity in Fatherhood Programs

### The Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare project

The Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL) project, conducted by Mathematica and the University of Denver, is testing the use of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) methodology to (1) strengthen the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives with their children in child welfare and (2) add to the evidence base on potentially promising engagement strategies for these fathers and paternal relatives.

A BSC is a collaborative learning approach to test and spread promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area. The BSC included staff with diverse roles in a team-based learning approach; multiple in-person learning sessions and some site-specific consultation; emphasis on the rapid use of data, feedback, and quality improvement; and a focus on organizational change and sustainable practices (Lang et al. 2015; Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003).

FCL is achieving these goals through two phases: a pilot study ([Fung et al. 2021](#)) and a subsequent descriptive evaluation. FCL is sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance and administered by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, in partnership with the Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The [FCL Descriptive Evaluation Design report](#) includes more information about the sites, the BSC, and this study.

In August 2019, five child welfare agencies began participating in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) aimed to strengthen father and paternal relative involvement with their children. One component of the BSC included a Collaborative Change Framework (CCF), which comprises five

domains for improving father and paternal relative engagement. Early in the project work, the experts who were developing the CCF recognized that racial equity was inextricably tied to supporting father and paternal relative engagement in the child welfare system. To reflect the importance of addressing



racial equity throughout the work, it was prioritized as one of the five domains. This brief describes four strategies fatherhood programs can consider to promote racial equity based on the experiences of five child welfare agencies<sup>1</sup> in the BSC and FCL project.

Throughout the BSC, participating child welfare agencies developed and tested strategies within the five domains by using Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA)<sup>2</sup> cycles. During cross-team learning sessions, teams shared challenges they had with developing strategies to address racial equity. These included uncertainty on how to tackle large systemic issues, the need for more support and time, and the need for greater buy-in from the child welfare system to address racial inequities (Fung et al. 2021). One of the faculty coaches<sup>3</sup> delivered a powerful presentation on the critical nature of racial equity work in the child welfare system, and the teams created a racial equity work group to galvanize and empower them to identify actionable strategies to test. Moreover, this intentional focus occurred around the time of the [George Floyd murder](#), adding a gravity and depth to the racial equity work. Having racial equity *specifically* named as part of the CCF from the beginning also helped maintain the participating child welfare agencies' focus on racial equity throughout the BSC.

In Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programming, Black and Hispanic or Latino individuals and families make up a large proportion of clients. (Avellar et al. 2021).<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is important for organizations and providers to understand how to deliver services in a way that is culturally relevant and responsive when attempting to improve outcomes for individuals, families, couples, and youth of color. This brief draws on data from the FCL pilot study and interviews with participating child welfare agencies team members conducted during the evaluation phase. Over 100 interviews were conducted across the five child welfare agencies in a variety of formats, including semistructured interviews and focus groups. We share themes and examples from across the sites that others could adopt to promote racial equity in fatherhood programming.



## Increase leadership buy-in and intentional focus on racial equity

Leadership that is intentional around racial equity sets a tone and expectation that racial equity is a priority within organizations. Fatherhood programs can potentially promote racial equity through increasing buy-in and intentionality from leadership. Multiple child welfare agencies that participated in the BSC used such an approach. At one agency, leadership discussed racial equity as part of the mission and vision of the agency. Having buy-in on promoting racial equity from leadership made engaging fathers and paternal relatives an expectation rather than an afterthought for agency staff. Leadership also engaged in constant messaging with staff on racial equity matters and made that messaging part of every day's conversation. For example, senior leadership encouraged supervisors to ask their supervisees if they had considered cultural implications when determining whether a child should be removed from the home. In addition, leadership was explicit with supervisors around coaching their supervisees on how to engage fathers of color. Such strategies included checking biases and challenging negative narratives around African American and Native American families.



“They [leadership] are present at the racial equity talk meetings, you know, like there’s a presence. . . . Like it’s an acknowledgment that is important, your time is important with it.”

—Staff member

Being creative when promoting racial equity helped increase buy-in with agency staff and partners. For instance, one agency created a champion group led by staff and community partners where they came together to talk about culture and areas where they can improve. Furthermore, this agency also created a board display in a communal lunchroom that listed strategies for how to engage fathers, particularly those of color. Having strategies posted in a location frequented by staff kept the importance of engaging fathers and paternal relatives, along with cultural adaptive strategies for fathers of color, on the forefront

“All the messaging, all of the repeating, modeling and training and all the things that you’re doing are I think ways to try to infuse that mind shift and kind of a paradigm shift. So, like that picture is very strongly painted in my mind is how you’re looking to create those messages and formulate your formalized training. Implicit bias awareness. That stuff.”

—Senior leadership

on their minds. Some participating child welfare agencies found that leadership modeling behavior and expectations set the tone that racial equity was a priority within their organization. At one agency, leadership was intentional about calling out instances of racism when engaging with fathers. For example, leadership stepped in when fathers of color were asked to do things that their White counterparts were not. Another agency described the importance of seeing leadership at non-mandatory learning sessions on racial equity. Having leadership engaged during those sessions highlighted the importance of the work and promoted buy-in with agency staff.



### Implement intentional training for promoting racial equity

Several participating child welfare agencies implemented training intentionally promoting racial equity to help staff maintain constant awareness of biases toward fathers of color. Fatherhood programs can potentially benefit from adopting a similar strategy. For example, one agency implemented

mandatory trainings in implicit bias as part of its onboarding process. Implicit bias training reminded staff that everyone has biases and that change starts with understanding that reality. One staff member described that a focus on racial equity had always been a part of her identity. However, with her intense caseload, she had gotten away from making this a part of her work. The implicit bias training reopened her eyes and encouraged her to maintain constant awareness of her biases. Community training partners can also be helpful. For instance, staff at one agency found a fatherhood engagement training delivered by a community leader insightful. After delivering the training to one set of staff, the nationally recognized fatherhood programming expert and community member delivered the same training to additional staff. The training will become mandatory in summer 2023. Staff who participated in the training said that the content kept them honest, described compelling statistics on racial disparity, and encouraged them to think of ways to implement change.

Another agency offered optional trainings on racial equality every Friday through the department. Although training sessions were optional, agency staff found the training sessions helpful. For example, staff found the speakers were engaging and challenged staff members to value the cultural expressions of those different from them. The training also helped staff challenge negative narratives and reflect internally around their own fears and biases. The training started slowly by addressing cultural differences such as language, hair texture, and parenting practices. The training consisted of breakout sessions in which they learned how to use family trees and cultural genograms to understand historical roots of injustice and structural inequalities.

“The county also requires [us] every year. . .to do certain trainings. Fatherhood is also now included in that. So, every year we have to train on fatherhood. [The training] was new, it was so fresh, and just the way that [the trainer] was, I mean, you know, he had all these clips and this information and these statistics. And when you brought it together, you couldn’t help but feel connected somehow or included or like, I just I want to be part of that. We need to push this.”

—Agency partner



## Create intentional spaces for vulnerable conversations around racial equity

Creating intentional spaces for vulnerable conversations is a potential approach that fatherhood programs can implement to promote racial equity. Participating child welfare agencies from the BSC found that this approach was important in helping them prioritize conversations around racial equity. For instance, one agency created a chat forum and café around racial equity in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Each week, dedicated staff led conversations on a racial justice topic. Although the forum was not mandatory, it allowed space for staff in the office to discuss the impact of racial justice issues on their work and on the families within the child welfare system. The forums were skillfully led and allowed for input from attendees, which contributed to improvement throughout.

Another agency organized a racial equity change team (RECT) for safe conversations after recognizing racial injustice trends across the country. The agency originally held a single training for all staff to highlight the history of negative biases around men of color in the United States and the impact of biases in today's society. However, the agency hopes to teach staff continuously to challenge their biases around the cultural expressions of men of color. Once a month, individuals at the agency engaged in "RECT time" and discussed the issues they were facing from a diversity, equity, and inclusion perspective.

To increase participation in the conversations, the agency pulled in experts on racial equity to lead the conversations. In the future, the agency intends to collect qualitative data to understand the impact of RECT time on staff members and their work, with the ultimate aim of making policy change around racial equity.



## Invest in consultants to help promote racial equity

Attempting to bring awareness using internal staff can be difficult considering competing priorities, lack of time, and the level of commitment needed to produce change. Thus, bringing in outside consultants or coaches can be helpful. Participating child welfare agencies highlighted the benefits of faculty coaches in building awareness toward the need for racial equity. Fatherhood programs could potentially find consultants who can offer similar benefits for promoting racial equity. Faculty coaches challenged assumptions and attitudes about Black, Brown, and Indigenous fathers and paternal relatives. Some agencies noted that learning sessions with faculty coaches galvanized them to address the biases of fathers of color. For example, some agencies mentioned that the shared language and concepts from their work in the BSC that was presented on antiracist work prompted them to reach out for more in-depth training and technical assistance (Agosti et al. 2021). For others, it either reinforced or expanded upon existing work and strengthened their commitment to addressing disparate treatment of Black fathers and their relatives (Agosti et al. 2021).

“I was part of the team doing the training and centering in on how history has seen men of color and how does that play out now. How does an agency become honest about that. That training was for the GALs [guardian ad litem], the volunteer partners, everyone in the agency, and that’s what birthed the RECT [racial equity change team] time. That was the hope of teaching staff continuously without it being a one-off training. The big draw is that we’re actually pulling in experts.”

—Community partner

## Conclusion

This brief summarizes the experiences of five child welfare agencies with promoting racial equity and approaches for how to begin infusing racial equity into responsible fatherhood programming. The approaches used by the agencies that participated in the BSC were focused on beginning steps of promoting racial equity, making them easily transferable to responsible fatherhood programming. In addition, the overarching goals of increasing father-child relationships in responsible fatherhood programs and the agencies that participated in the BSC make the approaches especially suitable for fatherhood programs. In sum, participating child welfare agencies found a variety of ways to address racial equity that responsible fatherhood programs could consider. Fatherhood programs can promote intentional leadership to increase buy-in with agency staff and partners. In addition, they can create safe spaces for conversations around racial equity. Investing in consultants can help reduce time barriers within organizations that is needed to produce change. Finally, responsible fatherhood programs can implement training specifically for promoting racial equity to increase staff members' awareness of their own biases and challenges that fathers face in their lives.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The five participating agencies were the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (Region IV, including the Hartford and Manchester offices); Denver Human Services (Colorado); Los Angeles County, California, Department of Children and Families (Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices); Prowers County Department of Human Services (Colorado); and the Wake County Department of Human Services (North Carolina).

<sup>2</sup> PDSA is a process for testing a change by developing a plan to test the change (Plan), carrying out the test (Do), observing and learning from the consequences (Study), and determining what modifications to make to the test (Act).

<sup>3</sup> Faculty coaches are subject matter experts who shared their expertise with teams and facilitated shared learning across teams. Faculty coaches were selected to ensure the representation of diverse perspectives and identities.

<sup>4</sup> About 40 percent of community fathers and nearly 20 percent of reentering fathers were non-Hispanic Black or African American, whereas 23 percent of community fathers and 12 percent of reentering fathers were Hispanic or Latino.

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