

Issue Brief

Sarah Campbell, Jennifer Bellamy, Roseana Bess, Sheila Cavallo, Brandon Hollie, and Matthew Stagner

Father Engagement in Child Welfare: Lessons for 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.

The BSC is a collaborative learning approach used to test and spread promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area. The BSC includes 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 is administered by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, in partnership with the Children's Bureau, at the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In August 2019, as part of the Fathers and Continuous Learning (FCL) project, five child welfare agencies began participating in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) focused on strengthening fathers' and paternal relatives' engagement with their children in the child welfare system. Teams from participating child

welfare agencies included child welfare staff and administrators, fathers and paternal relatives, and community partners, including fatherhood programs. This brief shares key lessons fatherhood programs can consider based on the experiences of the teams that participated in the FCL project.



Five key lessons from child welfare agencies

- / Building partnerships can expand programs' referrals, reach, and influence without spreading resources too thin.
- / Buy-in and standardization of father engagement practices from leaders can solidify the importance of father engagement within organizations and communities.
- / By working to elevate fathers' voices, programs can demonstrate fathers' value and identify areas for improvement.
- / Racial equity work helps make father engagement a priority, by both elevating it as a larger community issue and by reducing disparities.
- / Capturing data related to father engagement promotes continued efforts and addresses needed strategy changes.

Child welfare agencies and fatherhood programs often serve similar populations and have some overlapping services and goals. Given their overlap, it can be helpful for child welfare and fatherhood programs to learn from each other. Though the FCL project focused on strengthening father engagement in child welfare agencies, many of the lessons from tested strategies can be relevant for fatherhood programs seeking to enhance their father engagement strategies. Fatherhood programs may be using some of these same strategies. This brief aims to provide additional insights to further programs' father engagement efforts and support cross-system learning, by outlining specific examples of child welfare agencies' lessons learned in engaging fathers.

Key lessons from the participating child welfare agencies described in this brief can be helpful for fatherhood programs seeking to strengthen community and service partnerships, solidify the importance of father engagement, prioritize racial equity initiatives, integrate fathers' voices into the broader system of services, and document their programs' engagement efforts.

Build strategic partnerships

Establishing partnerships with organizations or systems that have unique strengths or programming characteristics ensured fathers' access to services they need to be successful. For example, one participating child welfare agency's partnership with a community group enabled more fathers to join a parenting class because the community group hosted the class after the workday, when the child welfare agency was closed. In this section, we present promising short-term strategies FCL sites used to address data challenges and strategies to collect data that helped sites further assess father and paternal relative engagement.

Similarly, fatherhood programs cannot address all fathers' needs. However, they can assess for these needs and broker relationships with organizations or systems that might be otherwise unfriendly or intimidating for fathers (for example, child welfare, child support, and courts). These relationships can be reciprocal. **Fatherhood programs can provide specific father-focused supports that can be missing in other programs or systems, and partners can provide support beyond the capacity of many fatherhood programs** or beyond the scope of fatherhood programs' grant funds. Examples of such support include mental health, domestic violence, and legal services. For instance, fatherhood programs can help find and engage fathers who have legal involvement, and the courts can encourage participation in father-friendly services or connect fathers who have legal needs with organizations that provide legal services.

Strategic partnerships can enable fatherhood programs to create a more seamless network of resources for fathers. **Community partners can support fathers by providing direct services and advocating for fatherhood engagement in the larger community.** One participating child welfare agency used community sites such as schools and doctors' offices to raise awareness of the importance of fathers throughout the community. Connecting to varied partners such as these enables fatherhood programs to build a wide network of support for fathers across their community and supports a network of services that value fathers and their needs.

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Spotlight on child welfare partnerships

Child welfare agencies can be an important partner for fatherhood programs. By working together, fatherhood programs and child welfare agencies can build a more integrated and holistic system of services to support fathers and their families. For example, one participating child welfare agency partnered with a fatherhood program to train the child welfare agency's program staff in father engagement.

These partnerships can be mutually beneficial in many ways:

- Child welfare agencies can be a source of referrals for fatherhood programs, and fatherhood programs can complement services that child welfare agencies provide.
- Fatherhood programs and child welfare agencies can co-advocate and collaborate in the community for fatherhood, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and for the inclusion of parents' and families' voices in those initiatives.
- Child welfare is a key system that many fathers must navigate, making partnerships between child welfare agencies and fatherhood programs essential.

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Seek leadership buy-in and standardization

Leadership at participating child welfare agencies standardized father engagement work through formal practices to engrain it in the agency's culture and emphasize it as a priority throughout the organization. Fatherhood programs embedded in larger child- and family-serving organizations can use this strategy to integrate father-inclusive strategies across those organizations. Leaders of

fatherhood programs can use similar intentional standardization techniques to ensure their organization maintains changes in practice in the case of staff or leadership turnover.

Providing supervision templates, including fathers in standard intake and assessment tools, and engaging fathers in other required processes can support this standardization.

One participating child welfare agency clarified its requirements for steps staff must take to find fathers when a child welfare case is opened. Clearly defining what the agency required regarding the engagement of fathers enabled agency leaders to provide their staff with a clear directive.

Fatherhood program leaders can lead by example to continually reiterate the importance of their program's work to engage fathers through all aspects of the program. Leaders of fatherhood programs embedded in larger organizations can also shape the larger collection of programs across organizations in a way that is more inclusive of fathers. To ensure father engagement is front and center in the larger organization, it is essential for organization program leaders to buy into father engagement work. **Leaders must continuously reinforce the importance of father engagement in larger systems and organizations to sustain the effort and ensure it remains a priority.** Two participating child welfare agencies sent monthly fatherhood newsletters to all staff with important reminders and updates on father engagement, such as unique suggestions for contacting dads. This practice served as a scheduled reminder for staff to remember the dad. Fatherhood programs in larger service organizations can similarly use this strategy to message the importance of father engagement.



We tried to do things to support a father-friendly environment within our schools, within our clinics, within our child care settings, and in the department—so that dads could feel like they have a place within parent-teacher conferences, within appointments for WIC [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children], within well-child visits, all those places.

Integrating father engagement into professional development or required training is also a useful tool for incorporating father engagement work across a larger organization. In addition to its initial orientation on father engagement, one participating child welfare agency required its program staff to participate in an enhanced training on father engagement. Requiring such training ensured new staff began their work with the same baseline understanding as seasoned employees about the necessity of father engagement. Another participating child welfare agency integrated this work by creating policies, documents, and training standards to infuse father engagement into its standard practice. These same strategies can also be used to ensure fatherhood programs maintain high-quality practices internally.

Intentionally include and value fathers' voices

Getting feedback directly from fathers is a vital step in improving services for fathers involved in child welfare agencies and fatherhood programs. **Providing opportunities for feedback from fathers and following up on that feedback can be an essential strategy for engagement.** One participating child welfare agency ensured they heard directly from fathers rather than making assumptions about their needs by collecting surveys from fathers to track engagement and satisfaction with services.

Fathers' voices and experiences can be powerful motivators for organizational change and staff buy-in for fatherhood programs. **Intentionally engaging fathers to shape programs can help create a culture of purposeful improvement in father engagement work.** Organizations can share fathers' perspectives internally or with community partners through trainings, videos, or other strategies. One participating child welfare agency collaborated with fathers in the community to share fathers' experiences through videos on its social media channels. Fatherhood programs can collect feedback through surveys, focus groups, or other information-gathering efforts.

To ensure programs get the quality feedback they need, however, programs must first gain fathers'

trust. **Building trust with fathers takes time and demonstration of support, follow-through, and listening,** especially for fathers who have had negative interactions with child welfare, child support, and other agencies, and said a lot of work is needed for agencies to counterbalance these experiences and earn fathers' trust. Building consistent relationships and trust can help fathers more successfully engage in services and feel more welcome to share their experiences and suggestions for improvements. Organizations can also hire the fathers they served or ask fathers to act as informal mentors. Two participating child welfare agencies did just that when they hired fathers as parent partners to inform system improvements and to support other parents navigating the child welfare system.

Prioritize racial equity to support father engagement

Racial equity work and fatherhood work go hand in hand. Successful father engagement can reduce the disproportionate representation of families of color in systems such as child welfare, making it a potentially powerful racial equity strategy.



It's a requirement when I have my meeting with my supervisors to go over a policy. And one of the things would be the diligent efforts [to find fathers]. What does that look like? Are we utilizing those [father identification] forms? [These are] kind of reminders [that] this is what we should be doing. And then, in turn, [with] supervisors, the expectation would be that they would use their time with their staff, and they're going to need to go over the same policy so that everybody is knowledgeable and hopefully consistent with practice.

Racially and ethnically minoritized children are overrepresented in child welfare systems. Successfully engaging fathers in child welfare services expands the potential for additional family supports and offers more opportunities to keep children with families and out of foster care (Coakley 2013; Trahan et al. 2020). One participating child welfare agency described how identifying fathers early on in a case prevented children from being placed in foster care.

Like child welfare agencies, there is a need to focus on the strengths and needs of racially minoritized fathers in fatherhood programs to ensure equitable service delivery (Perales et al. 2023). **Fatherhood programs should prioritize racial equity as an organizational value to create clear, explicit, and strategic direction for an organization's work.** When leaders prioritize racial equity as an organizational value, it sets a tone for the rest of the organization that racial equity should be a focus in all aspects of the program. As part of the BSC, participating child welfare agencies prioritized racial equity as a key component for improving father engagement. Like these child welfare agencies, fatherhood programs can prioritize racial equity initiatives to signal their commitment to better serving all fathers. For example, one participating child welfare agency created a racial equity change team with staff from all levels in the agency to discuss issues from a diversity, equity, and inclusion perspective. Another agency began to focus on father engagement during its Eliminating Racial Disparities and Disproportionality roundtables, which helped make fatherhood work a priority in the agency. This practice enabled staff to discuss topics they might not have had time or explicit permission to discuss.

Providing training focused on promoting racial equity is another strategy to enhance awareness of, commitment to, and skills in racial equity work. One participating child welfare agency implemented a racial bias training for staff at all levels of the department. Another agency brought in an outside expert to lead a training in fatherhood that encouraged staff to consider racial equity issues and think of ways to implement change. Fatherhood programs can consider similar trainings or initiatives to ensure program staff have the information they need to provide fathers with effective and equitable services.



Document and learn from father engagement work

Engaging staff with varied vantage points in continuous quality improvement (CQI) work can help ensure programs are getting the most valuable data. One participating child welfare agency has multiple staff at different levels of the agency review data to identify opportunities to improve father engagement. Data collection can be simple, including using data that the program might already have. One participating child welfare agency collected data on the initial call of a report of child abuse or neglect and data on child and family team meetings. The agency tracked how many fathers were contacted during the initial call and how many were invited to the initial child and family team meeting to discuss the next steps for a family's child welfare case. Because the agency already tracked information related to these calls and meetings, additional data gathering was a more manageable task.

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I think you can see that in some of the work that they're doing with The Voice [agency's effort to hear directly from fathers], with bringing not just dad's voice but mom's voice to the table. [You can see] the impact that it's having on our family team meetings and making sure that communication with dad is occurring prior to these meetings. [For example], reminding dad to bring a supportive team, reminding dad that this meeting is for you so you can come in and have those discussions and be open and honest and bring your voice to the table.

Capturing data about father engagement further supports the efforts of fatherhood programs and provides insights into how to continue or pivot program services and initiatives. The findings from these data can tie into or be a focus of CQI work, support efforts to secure funding, or point to necessary program improvements.

It might also be helpful for programs to get support internally or externally from researchers or others who are knowledgeable about data collection. One participating child welfare agency expanded its expertise by hiring a staff member and forming a new unit in the agency dedicated to CQI. The new staff member reviewed cases and other sources of information to track father engagement. Fatherhood programs may similarly benefit from hiring, or consulting with, people who have expertise in CQI. Several participating child welfare agencies also noted that ensuring dedicated time and space for their team to commit to father engagement work improved their capacity for data collection and for demonstrating their work with fathers to leaders, staff, or community partners.



Because we have to talk about cases through ERDD [Eliminating Racial Disparities and Disproportionality], we are being more intentional. The ERDD roundtables have certainly reduced detainments for African American families. We're the ones doing something different to move that needle. Families are doing the same thing they've always been doing. Enforcing that conversation with African American families makes the department more intentional about removing children.

Conclusion

This brief provides key lessons from five child welfare agencies about their experience with engaging fathers. Fatherhood programs, which have many commonalities with child welfare agencies and often serve fathers who have contact with child welfare agencies, might find these lessons relevant to their

own programs. Several participating child welfare agencies noted that although they focused on father engagement before, formally connecting their father engagement initiatives to other initiatives or priorities helped give legitimacy to their work in the space. Likewise, fatherhood programs may find it helpful to find connections to father engagement work happening in child welfare. As fatherhood programs seek to build their effectiveness and sustainability over time, and partner with other programs and services, these key lessons can help advance their efforts. Building partnerships can expand programs' referrals, reach, and influence without spreading resources too thin. Using buy-in and standardization of father engagement practices from leaders and organizations can solidify the importance of father engagement work within larger organizations, networks, and communities. A commitment to racial equity helps make father engagement a priority, by both elevating it as a larger community issue and by reducing disparities. By working to elevate fathers' voices, programs can demonstrate fathers' value and identify areas for improvement. Finally, capturing data related to father engagement promotes continued efforts and addresses needed strategy changes.

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Submitted to:

Pooja Gupta Curtin and Katie Pahigiannis, project officers
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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Submitted by:

Project Director: Matthew Stagner
Mathematica
1100 1st Street NE,
12th Floor, Washington, DC, 20002

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