

Issue Brief

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The Power of Partnerships: What Fatherhood Programs Can Learn from Child Welfare

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 used 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 (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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

In August 2019, five child welfare agencies began participating in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) focused on strengthening father and paternal relative engagement with their children in the child welfare system. This BSC was established as part of

the [Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare \(FCL\) project](#). Throughout the BSC, teams including child welfare staff and leadership along with their partners developed and tested engagement strategies using Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA)¹ cycles.



When testing and implementing engagement strategies during the BSC, participating child welfare agencies noted that community partnerships were a vital part of their work with fathers and paternal relatives. Child welfare jurisdictions often work with community partners to deliver services to families. Similarly, fatherhood programs often work with community partners to expand their supports beyond what they can directly provide to fathers (Strong 2022). Partnerships are also an important source of referrals and recruitment for fatherhood programs (Avellar et al. 2021). This brief aims to distill lessons learned from the FCL project about partnerships that might be relevant to fatherhood programs and describes ways fatherhood programs can use partnerships, such as:

- / Identifying and locating fathers
- / Increasing credibility with fathers
- / Connecting fathers and families to resources
- / Creating a more cohesive client experience
- / Expanding capacity to serve diverse fathers
- / Documenting and understanding the outcomes of their programs

The brief also discusses the benefits of diversifying partnerships and approaching them with intentionality.

Fatherhood Programs Can Use Partnerships for a Variety of Purposes

Connect to father-inclusive organizations, events, and businesses to support recruitment and enrollment

To serve fathers, programs must first identify and locate fathers. For the child welfare agencies involved with the FCL project, finding fathers had been a common challenge. Partnerships can address this challenge and help programs identify, recruit, and enroll fathers who are eligible for program participation.

One staff member at a participating child welfare agency described the historical challenge of finding and engaging fathers as the result of not making adequate efforts: “[Historically] we could just say mom said she didn’t know his name and that would be it. Now, not only do we have to document that, we [have] got to search all the different things we know to see if we can find who dad is. And once we find dad, we have to make efforts to get him involved...” Solving this challenge involves using many efforts to find fathers, including working collaboratively with partners. How participating agencies work with partners to find and engage fathers can inform other programs’ approaches to using partnerships for the same purpose.



“If the child welfare or foster care worker wants information about a dad they are trying to locate, they can reach out to us [child support partner] by email for that information, and we will look to see if we have information, and we can provide that to them ... to help them locate the father.”

–Child support manager

As you think about partnerships that can support your recruitment and enrollment efforts, consider agencies, organizations, and events that are varied and father inclusive. These can include job training and placement agencies, summer sports leagues and programs sponsored by parks and recreation departments, or sporting events. Other partnership opportunities might be working with organizations that serve families such as health clinics where fathers often attend ultrasound or well child visits (Walsh et al. 2014), local libraries at story time or reading programs (Chacko et al. 2018), or events and programming at schools (Potter et al. 2013). Consider partnering with these organizations on father-focused or father–child events and initiatives.

Partner with local organizations that are trusted by fathers to increase credibility

Credibility is an important element of successfully engaging fathers in services. Many fathers are motivated to engage in fatherhood programming and the services that they offer, however have faced myriad systemic challenges. For fathers who have had negative experiences with other agencies, service providers, or programs, enrolling in a fatherhood program may be daunting. To build trust and credibility, fatherhood programs can partner with father-trusted community organizations (Stahlschmidt et al. 2013; Watkins et al. 2022). One participating child welfare agency worked with community and faith leaders to reach out to fathers to overcome the skepticism fathers might have had about engaging with the agency. Another used a similar strategy, partnering with faith-based and community groups to have them pass out information about program services for fathers at community events.

Look for opportunities to partner with local organizations that are well known and trusted by the families and fathers in your community. Ask about opportunities to support their work with fathers and children, including being a supportive presence at their father and family engagement events. Being a trusted and valued partner to these organizations increases the likelihood that they will feel confident about using their own organizational reputations and credibility on your behalf.

Develop partnerships that can help connect fathers and families to supports

Partnerships can help connect clients to resources. Although many fathers are drawn to programs because of the opportunity to work on relationships

through parenting or relationship classes, others might be attracted to opportunities to receive services, such as legal or employment supports (Avellar et al. 2021).

One participating child welfare agency identified fathers' needs and connected fathers to other service providers in the community that could help. For this agency, the partnership ran in both directions; the agency not only made referrals to community providers, but also recruited new fathers from events hosted by community providers. This included working with a larger network of partner agencies to meet fathers' needs. For example, the child support partner working with one participating agency sent representatives to meetings of local fatherhood programs to share information about child support. A child support agency staff member said, "We have staff that participate with Day to Day Dads and Fathers Forever. We have staff that go out to their weekly meetings and engage with the men in those programs to talk about child support."

Tracking the resources available in the community can be challenging, but engaging with partners to learn about additional resources can be a solution. One staff member at a participating child welfare agency said, "It's hard to even know all the resources out there. Some programs are region-specific in the county, and there's a lot to know and keep up with while also educating the parent." By communicating with partners, fatherhood programs can remain up-to-date about local resources and learn about new opportunities for fathers.

During intake and assessment, and while engaging with a program, fathers might express a need for a variety of services and supports. Consider partnerships that can help you connect fathers and their



"Sometimes you find that the parents need extra help, so you might call in people in the community that can help them. There are various programs that could help them in the community, depending on what is going on."

—Parent education staff

families to food pantries, GED and other educational attainment, assistance with systems navigation (child welfare, legal, justice, and so on), stable and affordable housing, and job training and placement (which is particularly valuable and attractive to men and fathers). Consult fathers in your community to confirm which locally available supports are most valuable to them.

Create a more seamless network of resources for fathers

For many fathers and families, navigating services can at times feel disconnected or uneven if partners do not coordinate services (Pearson and Fagan 2019). Bringing together the service providers and agencies who engage with fathers can create common language and understanding, inspire creative thinking about how to reach and serve fathers, and develop a culture of coordinated services that more fully recognizes and considers the needs and contributions of fathers.

For example, one participating child welfare agency recognized the need to work collaboratively with other community providers to create an experience for families that was consistent and supportive across agencies, organizations, and programs. One of their staff members said, “Child welfare is part of a bigger ecosystem, and we need to work together.”

Partnerships are an opportunity for fatherhood programs to create a more seamless network of resources with shared values and approaches to fatherhood work. Child welfare agencies, child support enforcement, reentry programs, the courts, job training and placement programs, and family

support services agencies and organizations can collaborate to form a supportive web for fathers, their children, and their families.

Build connections with the courts to help fathers navigate the legal system

In addition to the need for a more seamless network across community resources, the legal system presents distinct and significant challenges to engaging fathers. Not all fathers who enroll in fatherhood programs are involved with the legal system, but many are. Having strong relationships with judges and attorneys within these systems can create bridges between the courts and fathers, increasing the value fatherhood programs offer not only to fathers, but also to children, families, and the community as a whole.

For example, one participating child welfare agency noted the importance of having supportive partnerships with legal partners and how it helped them expand an important service for fathers. One of their staff members said, “When we started the [FCL] pilot, we started to think about the barriers and whether in-house service for [DNA testing] would alleviate those barriers. We needed it to be a quick turnaround and accessible to fathers in court—not only did that give us more opportunity to connect with fathers, but we also had the support and buy-in from our legal partners. This gave us the power to then move to providing this in CPS [child protective services] and not just permanency.”

This child welfare agency developed a close partnership with an employee at local family court,



“We’ve also done a better job of partnering with our community and other Human Services programs to minimize the issues that families experience when they interact with any of us. For example, we’ve strengthened our relationship with child support. If you are first in child welfare and it was a good experience, and now you go to child support and have a different experience? It should feel consistent, and the experience should feel the same for our clients.”

—Child welfare staff

which helped the agency provide information and support to fathers seeking greater opportunities to connect with their children. The child welfare agency described how an evolving partnership with the courts created a shift away from using child support orders in a way that undermines fathers and families.



“It’s also changed partnership with legal and not using child support orders against families. We want parents to support their children in any way they can.”

—Child support manager

A second participating child welfare agency explained how its partnership with the court led to a shift in how the courts perceived fathers. A staff member from this agency said, “I feel like [the court is] emphasizing more that they’re trying to get that male base. It’s not that [no fathers] are involved. We did have a family that mom and dad were really involved and kids returned home. In the courtroom, they really stress that we need the paternal aspect.”

For fathers involved with the legal system, your program’s partnerships with legal professionals can be a vital form of support. Think deeply about the goals of your program and how they intersect with the goals of the legal system (such as, building family support to improve post-incarceration outcomes). Use the alignment you find to transform practices that are harming or undermining fathers into those that can support them and their efforts to build strong, healthy relationships with their children and families.

Expand your program’s capacity to serve diverse fathers by partnering with agencies that provide tailored services and supports

Fatherhood programs engage diverse fathers and families in a variety of communities. Programs seeking to advance their cultural responsiveness to better serve fathers can use partnerships to meet

this need or help their program develop the capacity to do so on their own. For example, one participating child welfare agency incorporated Latinx program mentors from the community into its family teams to increase the cultural competency of its efforts. Another participating agency brought in a consulting group to offer staff training on cultural competency.

These opportunities to improve cultural responsiveness might also be viewed from the lens of gender norms and expectations. Agencies and programs that are staffed primarily by women can partner with other community organizations and efforts that are staffed primarily by men, drawing on these organizations’ connections to and first-person understanding of the lived experiences of men.

To seek out partnerships that can build capacity to serve diverse fathers, fatherhood programs can assess their current agency and team for alignment with the communities they serve. Where there are gaps, seek out partnerships with other community organizations that have the cultural fluency or lived experience that can complement your strengths. Identify resources your agency and team can provide to these partners to support their programs and goal attainment, to ensure reciprocity. Fatherhood programs can expand this effort by working with the larger community of programs and providers to map areas of strength and match them to needs across the partnership network.

Collaborate with researchers to document outcomes, improve services, and communicate the value of fatherhood work

Data can demonstrate the benefits of services provided to fathers, families, and communities, and it can offer insights into opportunities for program improvements. Partnering with researchers and experts in quality improvement processes can help fatherhood programs use data to better understand their programs’ challenges and successes. It can also help programs document their efforts, understand their progress, and raise awareness of their work among interested parties. Finally, research partnerships can validate fatherhood programs’ efficacy and provide legitimacy.

Participating child welfare agencies used their partnerships with researchers for similar benefits. For example, in one of these agencies, staff reported that working with the BSC motivated them to think about how they use data. Because the BSC emphasized rapid-cycle learning (using PDSA cycles) and supported those efforts with the expertise of researchers, participating agencies were able to identify challenges, test strategies to address them, and collect and analyze data to understand the challenge and their progress in addressing it. One participating child welfare agency staff member said, “[The continuous quality improvement meetings are helpful] because it’s always good to know what you’re doing well, what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are, and where you need to focus your attention.” Another said, “Because of our work with [researchers], we came back to the table to think about how we could provide that service differently to provide it at all points of entry.”

Another participating child welfare agency reported numerous benefits of research partnerships. The agency said these partnerships supported efforts to secure increased funding, strengthened current partnerships or created more partnerships, increased exposure (which could lead to more enrollees), and provided more clout to use when pushing for policy changes or reforms. One manager at this same agency reported that although capturing and understanding data can sometimes be challenging, it is powerful to use statistics to illuminate and communicate the reach and value of services.

For practitioners passionate about helping others, research, data, and continuous quality improvement can seem impersonal or intimidating; but researchers are also passionate about helping others, and often motivated to better understand fathers and families by their own life experiences and passions. Consider collaborating with credible research partners to help you better diagnose your program’s challenges, replicate its successes, communicate its value, and sustain its good work.

Diversifying Partners Has Several Benefits

By thinking creatively about partnerships and expanding their partner networks, fatherhood programs can access a deeper pool of resources and expertise. Some participating child welfare agencies had formal partnerships with related systems: other government agencies (such as child support), the courts and attorneys, reentry programs, and workforce programs. Other partnerships were less common, such as strong working relationships with the faith-based community.

Thinking more broadly about who might serve as a partner could yield surprising benefits for your fatherhood program. Think beyond those community organizations and agencies that can refer fathers to your program. Include those that might be able to share resources (information, training, and events) or have mission alignment that is less direct than serving fathers, such as a focus on improving outcomes for children or creating a more resilient workforce.

For one participating child welfare agency, a community partnership yielded one such unanticipated gain. This partner could say and advocate for things more forcefully and critically, particularly when agency staff were less comfortable doing so. For example, critiques of administration or decision makers and issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are some examples of concerns that might be more comfortably or effectively addressed when raised by a separate agency or organization, rather than internal staff. When the messenger matters or your program doesn’t have access to the decision makers or policymakers that you need to reach, partnerships with organizations or agencies that do have that influence or those connections can help advance your cause.

To draw on a variety of partnerships, both established and newer, the FCL BSC encouraged teams to include a variety of people from diverse backgrounds and experience.

“Every now and then, it changes in regard to who is participating, but we definitely try to tap into whoever we make connections with. That’s probably a strength of ours, that we’re constantly inviting people into our group to have different perspectives and invite others into our work.”

–Child welfare supervisor

The factors that affect or support fathers’ lives and goal attainment are not static. Invite and engage with people with a variety of knowledge sets, skills, and lived experiences to fully inform your fatherhood program efforts. Be sure to include community fathers in those efforts. Remain consistently mindful of who is at the table with you as you make decisions about your program, and adjust your partnerships as your program and community grow and change. Inviting new organizations to collaborate with you can increase understanding between organizations, agencies, and initiatives and introduce fresh thinking and perspectives that might lead to novel approaches and important breakthroughs. Scan your partnership environment at regular intervals to identify and consider new opportunities for collaboration.

Intentionality Is Foundational to Effective Collaboration

Partnerships are an investment that take time and care to seek out and develop. Although there are many opportunities for partnerships and collaboration, and many reasons that partnerships can benefit fatherhood programs, they need to be cultivated thoughtfully. To make the best use of partnerships, it is helpful to intentionally plan for them.

Nurture

Partnerships are investments made over time. They are a long-term strategy for fatherhood programs, not a quick fix. For partnerships to be healthy and fruitful, you must consistently and intentionally nurture them and establish a shared purpose. Teams participating in the FCL BSC included community partners as members. These teams met regularly over time and, with intent, structure, and clearly defined goals, created the space and consistency necessary for productive investment.

Prioritize

To be effective, partnerships must be a priority, especially during times of crisis, and should not be pushed aside and taken up again when the crisis has passed. For example, for agencies and community partners participating in the FCL BSC, the teams were an important and supportive resource during the pandemic (Abendroth et al. 2021).

Reciprocate

Strong partnerships are reciprocal, addressing some needs and interests of everyone involved. The collaborative teams of the FCL BSC provided value to their agency and community partner members by focusing on issues that would be of interest to all, thereby ensuring sustained commitment and engagement.

Invest

Time is a finite resource, and day-to-day program operations are a top priority. These constraints can make investing in partnerships feel unattainable or not worth the effort. The paradox is that intentionally investing in partnerships can create a web of support for your fatherhood program that alleviates some of those burdens. For example, for a fatherhood program that has a single recruiter, a web of thoughtful and intentional partnerships that are continuously nurtured can multiply that person’s reach. By diverting some of that person’s time to building and sustaining partner relationships, your recruitment team expands from one person to many. Your recruiter shifts from fighting a fire that is a threat to your program (low recruitment) to building and tending one that sustains your program. Committing fully to partnerships with a high degree of intentionality enables you to engage and use resources beyond your program or agency.

Conclusion

The FCL project included teams of child welfare staff, leadership, and community partners working together to better engage fathers and paternal relatives, and highlighted the potential of partnerships. Partnerships between fatherhood programs and many other systems and service providers have the potential to bring reciprocal benefits to all partners and improve fathers' experiences with finding and receiving services that meet their diverse needs. Partnerships take time and care to initiate and maintain, but their potential is worth the intentional investment. The following six considerations can help guide your partnership development efforts.

Six Considerations for Forming Productive Partnerships

1. Work with other father-serving entities to develop mutually beneficial partnerships to improve and expand the services and supports you offer fathers and create a network that is easier for fathers to navigate.
2. Collaborate with partners to promote a more tailorable network of resources (for example, offering services in a variety of languages or targeted to specific cultural groups).
3. Commit to a continuous quality improvement approach to providing services and supports by actively engaging with existing partners to evolve thinking and scan for new partners and perspectives to add to the mix.
4. Be intentional about your collaborative efforts and prioritize partnerships as essential elements of shared community success.
5. Ensure lasting and productive partnerships by focusing on reciprocity. Mutual benefit helps sustain partner engagement.
6. Remember that organizational partnerships are relationships between people and require the same intentionality and care that support all productive human endeavors.

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Endnotes

¹ 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).

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