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What are some strategies for engaging fathers in child welfare?

Fathers play an essential role in their child's development. Research shows that outcomes for children improve when they have high-quality relationships and safe and healthy interactions with their fathers. Despite a growing awareness of the importance of fathers (including biological, noncustodial, fictive kin, and foster/adoptive) to children's health and well-being, child protection agencies remain focused largely on the relationship between mother and child.¹ Recognizing the need for inclusive practices that involve a child's entire family, many agencies are implementing initiatives and interventions that aim to remove barriers to the engagement of fathers.

This brief highlights various strategies — including examining policies and programs, cultivating an inclusive environment, and providing targeted supports — to help agency leaders consider approaches to strengthen father and paternal relative engagement.² For information about the benefits of father engagement, as well as barriers and biases that impact fathers involvement in child welfare, see the companion brief: [Why should child protection agencies engage and involve all fathers?](#)

“Engagement in child welfare must be inclusive of fathers. What is done for moms should also be done for dads. We must develop resources to ensure fathers are engaged and that they have what they need as parents.”

—Roger De Leon, Jr., Birth Father, 2023 Casey Excellence for Children Awards Winner

Examine policies and programs

An intentional examination of agency policies and programs can be helpful in identifying gaps in services for fathers and potential barriers to their engagement. Part of that examination should include [collecting](#)

[and disaggregating data by race and ethnicity](#) to reveal disparities in service access and outcomes achieved.

Child welfare laws and policies impact father-child engagement. The Fatherhood Research and Practice Network provides [state-by-state information on policies and programs](#) that affect father-child engagement across 10 service areas, including child welfare, criminal justice, family law, education, and child support. Since laws and policies vary from state to state, agency leaders must examine how their policies impact paternal involvement, as some make it more challenging to engage fathers (such as policies that require fathers establish both paternity and legitimation) and some make it easier (such as allowing fathers to legally establish paternity without requiring an order for child support).

As part of the [Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare](#) project, five child welfare agencies used [Breakthrough Series](#) methodology to assess, develop, and implement father-inclusive policies and practices. The Hartford office of the [Connecticut Department of Children and Families](#) developed father engagement strategies to inform and improve child placement and permanency outcomes. Other assessment tools like the National Fatherhood Initiative's [Father Friendly Check-Up™](#) can help child protection agencies evaluate whether their services and programs effectively promote and support father engagement. Upon completing the assessment, agencies gain access to videos, strategic planning documents, and opportunities for intensive staff training and resources.

“Fathers are often overlooked as a viable parenting resource, but we are capable of taking care of our children.”

—Michael Simmons, Vice President, Oregon Foster Parent Association

Cultivate an inclusive environment

Creating spaces that support fathers' social and emotional engagement and ensures fathers feel represented, seen, and understood is critical to their involvement in child welfare.

Design a father-friendly office environment

Agency offices should include posters and other visual acknowledgments that feature fathers of all ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities. These also should emphasize the value of co-parenting and father-child interaction in order to make fathers feel welcome and eliminate negative stereotypes of absent or apathetic fathers.³ Family rooms and visiting spaces should offer activities that promote father-child engagement. Official forms should be inclusive, using the terms “father” and “mother” separately when appropriate.

Create culturally responsive trainings

[A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care is a comprehensive account of](#) organizational efforts, outreach, engagement activities, programming, and training interventions to support father involvement. The guide also provides tips for engaging specific populations: young fathers, grandfathers, fathers involved with child welfare, fathers with substance use issues, incarcerated fathers, gay fathers, father of LGBTQ+ children, and fathers from diverse cultures. Training performed in a racially and culturally responsive way is paramount to build agency-wide awareness of the diverse challenges facing fathers, provide insight into equitable supports to best serve diverse paternal needs, and enhance staff's skills to engage all fathers. Racial and culturally responsive training also creates space for staff to identify personal biases and how they impact services for fathers.

Identify fathers and paternal relatives

Engagement of fathers and paternal relatives requires the development and implementation of a robust [family search and engagement](#) framework that includes **identification, making initial contact, family group conferencing, assessment, and safety and permanency planning.**

To identify and locate fathers, the child welfare division of the **Wake County Department of Health and Human Services in North Carolina** collaborates with its child support division to [administer paternity testing](#) to presumed fathers. Increasing child welfare professionals' access to genetic marker testing helps to establish paternity so fathers can assume custody before children are placed in foster care. If fathers are unable to assume custody and removal is deemed necessary, caseworkers can work with fathers to identify paternal relatives who can serve as kinship caregivers. In **Minnesota**, both parents are expected to engage in child welfare services (such as case planning and home visits). [Minnesota statutes](#) require caseworkers to diligently search for, identify, locate, and provide services to the noncustodial parent. When it is difficult to locate the noncustodial parent, caseworkers can conduct a search through the [Federal Parent Locator Service](#).

“When you eliminate the father from the picture, you’re also eliminating family members who may want a relationship with the child. Some paternal relatives may not know that they are a grandparent, an auntie, or an uncle, and if they knew, they may want to step up and be part of the child’s life.”

—Sharon Rochelle, Kinship Caregiver

Provide targeted support

Identifying and providing targeted supports to fathers can be key to their engagement, including involving fathers in programs traditionally directed toward mothers, offering opportunities for peer support, and coordinating with existing community programs.

Involve fathers in home visits

Facilitating home visits with fathers helps to focus on the whole family and challenge misconceptions that home visiting programs are only for mothers. Home visits often center family activities and supplemental materials toward child development and parenting in general without highlighting a specific role. However, caseworkers also can provide father-specific resources and implement other strategies to [involve fathers in home visits](#). When working with unmarried parents, some programs offer separate home visits and support for fathers, which allow caseworkers to provide individualized activities, case plans, and content that center the father’s needs and goals.

The [Connecticut Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program](#) hires men to provide direct services to fathers, using the [Parents as Teachers](#) framework. In addition to making weekly home visits, the male staff lead workshops and focus groups. Recruiting and retaining skilled male staff can be a challenge, however. The Connecticut program implements flexible scheduling options that enable staff to work part-time as a home visitor while maintaining full-time employment. This also can benefit fathers who may require visits at non-traditional times due to work and other obligations.

Dedicate staff training to supporting fathers

At the **Allegheny County Department of Human Services’ Office of Children, Youth and Families in Pennsylvania**, father engagement specialists provide one-on-one support to help strengthen fathers’ relationships with their children, families, and communities. The specialists are assigned or requested to work alongside caseworkers to support fathers.

Fatherhood trainings and focus groups offer a learning space where fathers can gain skills to strengthen relationships with their children. Evidence-based curriculums such as [Supporting Father Involvement](#) and the National Fatherhood Initiative’s [Core Fatherhood Programs](#) (24:7 Dad, InsideOut Dad, Understanding

Allegheny County's Department of Human Services offers fatherhood programs through a network of [Family Support Centers](#), and the [Fathers Collaborative Council of Western Pennsylvania](#). In North Carolina, the **Wake County Department of Health and Human Services** partners with [Guardian ad Litem](#) volunteers who serve as court-appointed advocates in support of fathers' safe reunification with their children.⁴ The **Indiana Department of Child Services** implements father engagement supports through [network of providers](#), including [SCAN](#) and [Ireland Home Based Services](#), to offer assistance and services to fathers whose children are involved with child welfare. The state agency implemented [fatherhood service standards](#) as a guiding framework for partnering with network providers to engage fathers in services, improve child safety, well-being and permanency, strengthen father-child connections, and promote positive relationships between families and their caseworkers.

—Lisa Myles, Adoptive and Resource Caregiver

These resources provide further insight into how to promote and practice inclusive father engagement in child welfare.

Resource	Summary
Vann, N. (2021). Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources From the Field	A compilation of resources that highlight the challenges and key issues associated with launching and sustaining a successful fatherhood program.
The Administration for Children & Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (2023). Toolkit for Building System Capacity to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare	This toolkit can help child protection agencies improve organizational culture as it relates to engagement of fathers and paternal relatives. Individual tools include a self-assessment, Plan-Do-Act worksheet, and data collection planning worksheet.
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families (2023). Strategies for Promoting Racial Equity in Fatherhood Programs	This brief describes four strategies fatherhood programs can consider to promote racial equity. These strategies are based on the experiences of five child protection agencies committed to cultivating racial equity for men of color as part of the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare project.

Child Welfare Information Gateway (2022). Engaging Fathers: Putting Lessons into Practice. Podcast Series.

- [Part 1: Episode 71 - Hartford, Conn.](#)
- [Part 2: Episode 72 - Los Angeles County](#)
- [Part 3: Episode 73 - Prowers County, Colo.](#)

This three-part podcast series highlights the efforts of agency teams from three child protection agencies that participated in the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare project, which aimed to improve placement stability and permanency outcomes for children by involving fathers and paternal relatives. The agencies featured in the podcast share strategies to help create an agency culture that prioritizes thinking about and implementing father-inclusive practices.

¹ Sandstrom, H., Gearing, M., Peters, H., Heller, C., Healy, O., & Pratt, E. (2015b). [Approaches to father engagement and fathers' experiences in home visiting programs](#) (OPRE Report #2015–103). Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.

² Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Lisa Myles; Roger De Leon, Jr.; and Sharon Rochelle. An additional contributor to this brief: Michael Simmons, Vice President, Oregon Foster Parent Association.

³ Primus, L. (2017). [Changing systems & practices to improve outcomes for young fathers, their children & their families](#). Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.

⁴ Baumgartner, S., Fung, N., Kalisher, A., Campbell, S., Hollie, B., Bellamy, J., Abendroth, E., Bess, R., & Stagner, M. (2023). [Beyond checking the box: How participating in a breakthrough series collaborative supported the efforts of five child welfare agencies to engage fathers and paternal relatives](#). OPRE Report #2023-223. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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