

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Implementing Services for Fathers

Fathers play an important role in the lives of their children, families, and their communities, and father involvement increased dramatically over the past several decades. With an increase in father involvement and evolution in the role of fathers in the family, services at the federal, state, and local levels are working to support fathers and strengthen families. The state of Texas recognizes the important role that fathers play in the lives of their children and families, and how challenging it can be for some fathers to be involved. In addition to father-specific services, organizations that primarily serve mothers and children have an opportunity to include fathers in their offerings and support the whole family.

To identify best practices for implementing services for fathers, the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) used information from the Educating Fathers for Empowering Children Tomorrow (EFFECT) Program Evaluation and 2019 Texas Regional Fatherhood Summits. The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' Prevention and Early Intervention Division (PEI) developed the EFFECT Program to support fathers and strengthen families through evidence-based fatherhood programs. The 2017 EFFECT program evaluation examined implementation and outcomes, inventoried Texas investments in fatherhood, and identified best practices for supporting family inclusiveness. During the summer of 2019, CFRP and PEI co-hosted four Texas Regional Fatherhood Summits across the state for government employees, service providers, nonprofit representatives, foundation personnel, and academics. Regional summit attendees shared successful methods their organizations employ to serve fathers.

Create an Environment that is Father-Inclusive

To begin effectively including fathers in services, organizations must create a father-friendly environment. Conducting a review of the strategic plan and mission can help organizations identify whether they are ready to serve fathers and areas of opportunity where they can include fathers in their current services. In addition to incorporating fathers into their strategic plan and mission, organizations need to create a physical space that is welcoming and inclusive for the whole family. Creating a father inclusive space may be as simple as adding photos of fathers and children to lobby areas and marketing materials. Because many fathers are unavailable during typical work hours, organizations have successfully encouraged father

participation by offering services at flexible times during evenings and weekends or by meeting fathers at a convenient location during their lunch break.

Organizations need to train staff on the importance of father involvement and strategies to engage fathers, such as asking fathers to help complete required documentation and setting goals with both parents. To show fathers they are valued members of the family, forms need to use inclusive or gender-neutral language and have space for both parent's information. Hiring male staff can give fathers someone to relate to and can help fathers feel more comfortable participating in services. For fathers who grew up lacking a bond with their father figure, male staff can provide a needed positive relationship with another male and examples of healthy parenting behaviors.

Creative Strategies Can Improve Recruitment

Organizations frequently struggle to recruit fathers into programs and services, and, especially, to reach fathers who may benefit the most. Targeting services to young or teen fathers, formally incarcerated fathers re-entering society, and fathers who are involved with Child Protective Services (CPS) may help break cycles of disadvantage. Additional groups to target include fathers who are establishing paternity, access and visitation orders, or child support orders, and fathers in the military. Establishing recruiting relationships with various systems that interact with fathers, such as family courts, sheriff's departments, parole offices, halfway homes, and schools, can help organizations reach fathers who most need support. One organization successfully recruits fathers by visiting halfway houses and the county prison and offering fathers the opportunity to complete a parenting program while they are required to be in residence. When reaching out to potential partners, organizations recommend sharing the positive outcomes of the service and the benefits to the entire community. Organizations also successfully targeted recruiting efforts to areas in the community that fathers frequent, such as peewee sports, barbershops, after school care, and Walmart. Targeting fathers in situations that are child-focused, such as the hospital after the birth, home visits, or childcare centers, can help fathers focus on how participating in services will positively impact their children.

One of the simplest and most effective methods to recruit fathers is to invite them to participate in the service. Whether sending information directly to a father or speaking to them in a parking lot after they drop off their partner, invitations help fathers know they are welcome to participate and that there are services available for them. In addition to father-specific offerings, providing services focused on supporting mothers, such as breastfeeding partners, appeals to many fathers. Offering incentives that primarily include items fathers need for their children (e.g. diapers, wipes, formula, and clothes) are successful but expensive. Some organizations have solicited donations of goods from nonprofits in their community to use as incentives.

Find Early Intervention Points

Many fathers need services because they have been struggling for years and are overwhelmed by financial pressures, incarceration histories, and children with multiple partners. A critical

window of opportunity for services is reaching young fathers before they have multiple issues with which to contend. Supporting young fathers can help them avoid the vicious cycle of relying on criminal behaviors to alleviate financial burdens, incarceration increasing the financial burden because of limited legal employment options, and turning to criminal behaviors to pay bills.

A common struggle facing young fathers is balancing parenting, work, and education. Organizations frequently see young fathers making a tradeoff between the long-term success education can bring and low-paying current employment. Stresses of education and work can make it difficult for young fathers to be involved with their children. Forming relationships with educational institutions and employers allows services to support young fathers as they balance work and school providing them with a stronger foundation and more resources to support their children.

Support Coparenting Relationships

When parents are not in a romantic relationship, coparenting is a frequent challenge. Some organizations have inadequate information and training on the best methods to help parents build healthy coparenting relationships. Other organizations have difficulty navigating contentious relationships, which can lead to the exclusion of fathers from services. Employing methods such as mediation or parallel parenting can help parents focus on the needs of the child and avoid coparenting behaviors that negatively affect their children. Parents in a romantic relationship lack services to help them address how their interpersonal relationship will change when a new baby arrives. Parents, particularly young parents, are frequently overwhelmed by a baby and unable to address their own relationship struggles. Incorporating a focus on helping parents understand their relationship into an organization's work can help promote healthy coparenting.

Connect With Other Services in the Community

Fathers have complex needs that cannot be supported by a single service. Staff with current information about available community services can provide participating fathers with valuable referrals. Many of the difficulties fathers face are intertwined, and one challenge will exacerbate other problems. If organizations cannot help directly with an issue, they can connect participants to other services to provide a full system of support. Those working with fathers specifically identify a need for better referrals for legal matters such as child custody and visitation or immigration. Local collaboration between services may assist in increasing referrals of fathers between services, identifying needs of fathers specific to that region, and developing regional programs and practices to serve fathers and their families.

Collect Information on the Effectiveness of the Service

It is imperative that organizations conduct evaluations of their services to ensure their services are meeting the stated goals. When creating evaluation tools, organizations must be sure they are directly measuring the outcomes the service model intends to impact to accurately

demonstrate the value of the service. After obtaining feedback on the effectiveness of services, organizations need to be flexible enough to make changes, if needed, to ensure the services are impacting the desired outcomes. Many organizations have effects on participants beyond the stated goals. When organizations are flexible and think creatively, they can identify unexpected benefits of their offerings and adapt their services to better support fathers.

It is also important for organizations to hear from the population they are serving, and adapt services in response to the feedback. Speaking directly to fathers can identify unknown or unmet needs of participants, so organizations can add to or tailor their services to provide better support. Fathers may ask for more events or spaces for fathers to spend time with their children or conferences for fathers. Other changes may involve altering meeting activities to appeal to more participants, such as offering basketball games instead of luncheons. It would not be possible for the state or for communities to incorporate every suggestion fathers make to enhance or improve the services. However, communities may be encouraged to pilot and test adaptations, and share the lessons learned that could lead to broader implementation of successful alterations or additions to service models.

Conclusion

Children with involved fathers do better on health and well-being metrics, but some fathers face challenges to being involved. Services can support fathers and strengthen families. When implementing services for fathers, organizations need to first assess if their services and environment are father inclusive. Once organizations are ready to serve fathers, they need to find the best strategies to recruit participants, whether it is forming relationships with systems that interact with fathers or targeting areas in the community that fathers frequent. Issuing invitations directly to fathers is one of the simplest and most effective recruitment methods. Specifically targeting young fathers can help prevent fathers from getting trapped in a cycle of struggle and unhealthy behaviors. One common difficulty fathers face is maintaining a healthy coparenting relationship, and not letting stressors between parents negatively affect the child. Organizations need to be aware of this issue and work to promote healthy coparenting and parental relationships. As one service cannot meet all fathers' needs, by maintaining current information on community services, organizations can provide valuable referrals. To ensure services benefit fathers, organizations need to conduct evaluations and listen to feedback from participants. Being flexible enough to make changes to services and incorporate feedback will help organizations best support fathers. All organizations working with Texas families can follow the best practices to serve fathers and promote whole-family policies.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.