



CONNECTED TO OTHERS IS A GOOD PLACE TO BE

Helping Fathers Build Their Social Capital

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Connected to Others is a Good Place to Be: Helping Fathers Build Their Social Capital¹

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As interest in fathers’ involvement in the lives of their children has increased, so too have investments in Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs.² These programs provide an array of services designed to help fathers fulfill their social, emotional, and financial obligations to their children and families. Although many of these interventions have produced positive outcomes, research has found that program services are not always sufficient to help fathers overcome structural barriers that can prevent their full involvement in the lives of their children (Randles, 2020). Empowering fathers by improving their social capital may help fathers overcome these obstacles (Perry, 2011).

The purpose of this information brief is to discuss the research on social capital, especially as it relates to fatherhood programs; describe ways in which fatherhood programs can increase the social capital of fathers; consider the efforts of a specific fatherhood program that successfully built fathers’ social capital; and provide tips and resources for practitioners and researchers interested in integrating social-capital-enhancing components into their interventions.



STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

OBSTACLES TO THE INVOLVEMENT OF FATHERS IN THE LIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN

Disadvantaged fathers tailor their understandings of paternal involvement to account for socioeconomic constraints, including poverty and racism. (Randles, 2020, p. 1)

Low-income Black and Latino men face deeply entrenched socio-economic barriers and systemic factors that shape their parental motivations, identities, and abilities. (Roy and Dyson, 2010, p. 153)

Fatherhood programs [are] rare spaces where low-income men [can] access resources and shape positive paternal identities in the context of unpredictable local communities and long-standing social stigmas due to race and class. (Randles, 2020, p. 12)

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²The federal Office of Family Assistance has provided grant funding for responsible fatherhood programs since 2006. These programs provide services designed to boost fathers’ parenting, relationship, and employment skills.

Defining Social Capital

Social capital can be defined as the human and financial resources or benefits that a person has at his or her disposal. Social capital may accrue from the support an individual receives from family, friends, social networks, and other connections or group memberships (Engbers et al., 2017; Coleman, 1990; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015; Putnam, 2001).

The social capital that a person has can be strategically leveraged to take advantage of social opportunities (Portes, 1998). Analyzing how individuals obtain employment is one way to demonstrate how social capital is leveraged. Surveys have estimated that 70 to 85 percent of employees report that they secured their current job through networking; in fact, up to 80 percent of new jobs are never advertised—they are filled internally or through networking (Payscale, 2017). Individuals who do not have the right contacts may never get the opportunity to interview, let alone be hired, for certain jobs. The axiom rings true:

WHAT one knows is less important than WHO one knows and, by extension, who THEY KNOW.

To illustrate this concept, researchers have identified at least three different types of social capital (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015; Keeley, 2007):



BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL. This relates to connections to people based on a sense of common identity. These connections generally include people in an individual's immediate social network, such as family, close friends, and others who share similar characteristics. Connections also may include neighbors in a community or peers in a fatherhood program.



BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL. This relates to connections to people beyond an individual's close associates and immediate environment, which would include people with different values or life experiences. Examples of this type of connection may include work colleagues, new friends, or staff at a fatherhood program.



LINKING SOCIAL CAPITAL. This relates to connections to people even more removed from a person's day-to-day experiences. These people may hold a higher or lower socioeconomic status than the individual. This type of social capital is the hardest to build because it requires that individuals become acquainted with people whose lives are quite different from their own, especially as it relates to meeting people in positions of status and power. For example, opportunities to meet board members of a fatherhood organization or volunteers from partner agencies may help fathers build this type of connection.



Social Capital and Fatherhood

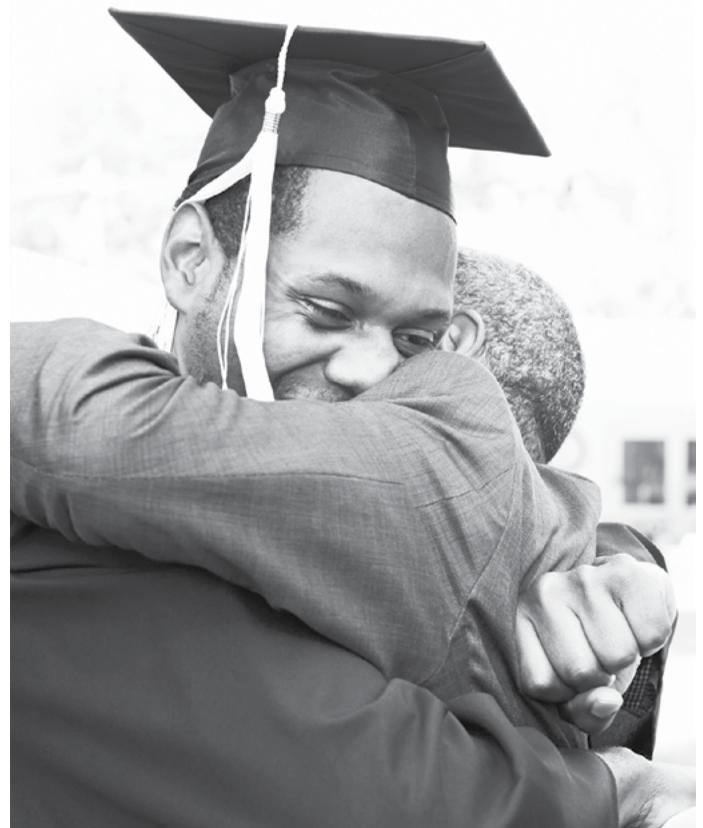
The social capital of fathers has direct implications for how they raise their children, how well they are able to provide for them, and what advantages they are able to confer on them. Fathers with access to multiple levels of social capital may have more opportunities to provide for their children, encourage and support their educational attainment, help them build their own social capital, and guide them toward career track job openings. When fathers are divorced, separated, or living apart from their children, the ability to provide such opportunities may help reduce coparent resistance to their ongoing involvement with their children.

To date, only a few studies have examined how fathers' social capital might impact their involvement with their children. The limited literature on fathers and social capital tends to focus on the breadth and depth of fathers' social networks--in other words, their bonding social capital--and explores how close relationships with family members and friends can facilitate fathers' involvement with their children. A series of studies analyzing data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study found positive associations between larger social networks and the likelihood that non-resident fathers establish paternity (Castillo, 2010), comply with child support orders (Castillo, 2009), and maintain positive involvement with their children (Castillo & Fenzl--Crossman, 2010). Other research has concluded that the level of single, non-custodial fathers' involvement with their children is associated with the support they receive from extended family members (Perry, 2009). One study found that paternal grandmothers were a valuable resource; they provided child care assistance and made their homes available as neutral drop-off and pick-up locations for father/child visits. Having this support helped fathers maintain access to their children and gain parenting time with them (Edin & Nelson, 2013). Paternal grandmothers and other extended family members may also be able to advocate for fathers, especially young fathers, and help them negotiate coparenting relationships with the mothers of their children and extended family on the maternal side.

Bonding social capital does have limited benefits (Edin & Lein, 1997). Without the additional benefits that accrue from bridging and linking with people beyond their immediate social networks, individuals and groups can become socially isolated and remain disconnected (Bolin et al., 2004). Members of disadvantaged and socially isolated minority communities are especially at risk of social

isolation and disconnection (Wilson, 1987). Fatherhood programs are disproportionately populated by unmarried, non-resident fathers who have less extensive social networks than their married counterparts (Ravanera, 2007; D'Angelo et al, 2016). Because these programs tend to serve low-income men and men of color from marginalized, urban communities, where social networks are often populated by similarly disadvantaged men, practitioners need to pay special attention to helping these fathers build their bridging and linking social capital. Without such capital, it can be harder for fathers to secure gainful employment and stay involved in their children's lives.

A report from the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation, which is a study of four RF programs and two Healthy Marriage programs, shows evidence of these low levels of social capital. Along with implementation and impact studies, PACT featured a qualitative study component that included in-depth, in-person interviews with RF program participants over a 3-year period. These interviews underscored how isolated many of the fathers were. Interview data collected from 54 fathers indicated that, on average, the fathers



SOCIAL CAPITAL DISPARITIES

DECADES-LONG STUDY SHOWS THE LONG SHADOW OF A POOR START

White men were finding their jobs through informal, word-on-the-street hiring networks of which black men were not part. [When asked] how they found their current or most recent job, white men were much more likely to say, “through family or friends,” while African American men most often said, “on my own.”

On your own is not a good place to be.

Karl Alexander, author of *The Long Shadow* (2014), quoted by Popkin (2014)

identified only 5 core social network relationships (D'Angelo et al, 2016); as the PACT report notes, this is well below the average of 23 core ties reported in a national survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Boase et al, 2006).

Another report from PACT found that although many of the fathers built short-term relationships with other program participants, these relationships seldom lasted after the program was completed (Holcomb et al, 2015). Moreover, very few fathers reported that they received tangible assistance with housing or other financial needs from other community organizations (D'Angelo et al, 2016). The report concluded that fathers both needed and wanted social support. These findings underscore the dearth of fatherhood program participants' social support networks and shed light on the need for responsible fatherhood programs to integrate bonding, bridging, and linking social capital building activities into their intervention protocols.

Need for Trust and Support to Build Social Capital

Many fathers in disadvantaged communities are not being informed of, or recommended for, job opportunities to which their employed peers or social service staff could connect them. This situation arises because those who are employed in these communities are often wary of association with job seekers who they view as untrustworthy (Smith, 2005). From their perspective, it may be too risky to provide job-finding assistance to someone who may not meet employer expectations. Such attitudes can impact the job-seeking options, and confidence, of unemployed men in the community. Compounding the issue, one study (Smith, 2007) found that Black urban men are reluctant to ask their peers about job openings for fear of being perceived as needy. Furthermore, some social service staff interpret this inaction as unwillingness to find work, which, in turn, can affect staff motivation to help fathers bridge their social capital.

LACK OF TRUST LEADS TO LONE PURSUIT OF JOBS



Residing in a neighborhood characterized by concentrated disadvantage ... [shapes] the extent to which job-holders understand job-seekers as risky investments and affects the extent and nature of the assistance they are willing to provide.

A significant minority of job-seekers, cognizant of how they are perceived by others in their social milieu, refuse to seek or accept assistance from job-holders who have job information and influence.

***Instead,
they choose to go it alone.***

(Smith, 2007, pp. 25-26)

Lessons from the Field:

Ways in which Fatherhood Programs can Build Social Capital

Although fatherhood programs do not typically name building social capital as a program goal, many programs do provide services that can increase the social capital of fathers. A review of the literature on fatherhood interventions shows many fatherhood interventions include programmatic components that can impact social capital in a positive way. These activities include:

- ✓ **Providing a safe, nurturing space that affirms participants as men and fathers, enhances paternal self-efficacy, and builds fathering knowledge and skills (Randles, 2020).**
- ✓ **Encouraging fathers to reflect on their personal journeys, set goals, and move toward stability in their personal and occupational lives (Gearing et al, 2008).**
- ✓ **Connecting fathers to community resources based on individual needs (Mazza, 2002).**
- ✓ **Guiding fathers toward educational and employment opportunities (Julion et al, 2018).**
- ✓ **Providing ongoing coparenting support (Cookston, 2007).**
- ✓ **Encouraging peer bonding and connections (Hudson et al, 2003).**
- ✓ **Developing alumni leadership groups to encourage long-term engagement and contribution to local community problem-solving (Bowling, 2019).**

These activities can lead to increases in the bonding social capital available to a father; when case managers and other staff connect fathers to employment and other community resources, they are also helping fathers bridge their social capital. Simply being a program alumnus of an organization that is well known and respected in the local community can boost a father's social capital; serve as proof of paternal commitments to judges, mothers, and others who mediate access to their children; and open doors to employment and other opportunities that otherwise may not exist. Program graduates can experience a boost in both bridging and linking social capital when they can obtain letters of recommendation, phone calls, and other communications from program staff. If staff invite board members, employers, and other well-connected community members to visit the program and meet program participants, similar bridging and linking opportunities can take place. A more formal way to offer these opportunities is by offering a mentoring program for fathers or a program module focused on civic engagement. These methods introduce fathers to specific ways they can become actively engaged in community enhancement and advocacy activities that by sheer involvement expand their range of networks and model municipal engagement for their children.

To illustrate how a typical fatherhood program can help fathers build their social capital, the next section features examples and anecdotes from a fatherhood program, 4 Your Child, which has intentionally aimed to infuse social capital development into the structure of its programmatic activities.



BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN ACTION: A Program Example — 4 Your Child

4 Your Child is a responsible fatherhood intervention for non-resident fathers in Louisville, Kentucky, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. To help fathers take more active roles in their children's lives, the program provides group-based parent education workshops and individualized solution-focused case management services.³ The parent education workshops are offered on a recurring basis. Each group of fathers—oftentimes referred to as a “cohort”—complete the full series of workshops together, which helps them develop a sense of belonging to, and support for, each other.

In addition to the formal parent education and case management services, the *4 Your Child* team is committed to maintaining a program culture of cohesion and promoting a sense of community in which all of the fathers affirm and support each other. This approach, which is established in the workshop cohorts and maintained through the program's alumni group, helps to build participants' bonding social capital.

The program's staff and administrators also try to leverage their professional networks and create capacity-enhancing opportunities that can build the bridging and linking social capital of program participants.

The following anecdote demonstrates some of the ways in which *4 Your Child* helps expand program participants' social capital. This anecdote shows that the fatherhood program does much more than parent education and case management. The program serves as a vehicle for establishing relationships and opening up networks that provide access for participants and alumni to people who can provide fathers with opportunities to demonstrate their talents and abilities. That's the essence of social capital.

³For more information on the *4 Your Child* program, see www.4yourchild.org

BUILDING BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL – In the Words of *4 Your Child* Program Alumni

“*—“Being a part of this program has helped me realize I’m not the only one experiencing certain things. We’re all here to take certain steps to be better fathers for our children.”*

—“I came in here with strangers, but I was able to open up with these guys and the facilitators and everybody in here.”

—“To get the answers that I needed, not that I wanted, I had to actually get outside of myself ... and let go of all of my problems.”

—“These gentlemen didn’t judge me; they won’t judge you. They just give you some experiences that you can relate to and help you along the way.”

—“For real, this is probably one of the best experiences I’ve had because I was able to meet strangers who welcomed me, and we all helped each other out.”

—“This is a good experience no matter whether you have older children or you have an infant, because it’s as much what you learn from each other as what you learn from the facilitators.”

—“When you hear another person talking about what he’s going through, you can relate that to something you went through in the past. It just helps you know how to deal with the situation.”

—“You just know that you’re not alone. I’m grateful and blessed to have this experience.”

Building, Bridging, and Linking Social Capital

– An Anecdote from the *4 Your Child* Program (Armon Perry, Ph.D.)

Once per quarter, I visit Roederer Correctional Facility in Oldham County, Kentucky, to teach a parenting session for men who are scheduled to be released within the next 90 days. One day at the security checkpoint someone called my name. Somewhat surprised, I turned around and was greeted by a man wearing a Department of Corrections jumpsuit. He reported that he was scheduled to attend the session that I was about to facilitate and that he recognized my picture from the website of the University of Louisville School of Social Work. That is where I serve as a professor and direct the Bachelor of Social Work program. He indicated that he had been online through the correctional facility's computer lab to apply to the college. He was interested in becoming a social worker because his family had interactions with the child protective service system, and he had benefited from the services of social workers. He said he wanted to “pay it forward” once he was released.

At the end of the group session, he told me he enjoyed the presentation and was interested in enrolling in *4 Your Child* when he was released from the facility. To his credit, four or five months later, he attended one of our orientation sessions, enrolled in the program, and attended every single session. At his cohort's graduation, he was named MVP, an informal recognition given to the most engaging and enthusiastic member of the cohort. At the graduation session, he mentioned that soon after being released, he had applied to the University of Louisville to pursue his goal of studying social work. His application was denied with no explanation for the rejection. I could see the pain and disillusionment on his face.

He and I had previously discussed his concerns about the invisible discrimination that follows people with a history of incarceration, even after they officially pay their debt to society. I told him to apply again at the end of the semester, but to first email the university's admission office a note stating his intention to reapply. Disappointed with this response, he told me that the original denial letter came from the admissions office. I told him I knew the chief admissions officer and asked if he would send an email to her requesting the reasons he was originally denied. I also asked him to copy me on the email so that I could respond and vouch for him in a way that was affirming, without soliciting or expecting preferential treatment. Once I received the email, I followed up with the chief admissions officer with the following statement: *“Listen, to whatever extent I have any credibility, goodwill, or social capital built up with you [chief admissions officer], I want to use it all right here. If it were a poker game, I'm pushing all my chips to the middle of the table on [the participant's name] behalf.”* Three weeks later, I received an email from the applicant letting me know he had been accepted into the university.

Subsequently, I have seen him on campus at least three times and each encounter reminded me of the power of social capital. Three years from now, this man will be walking across the stage as a college graduate with the requisite education to secure a job and position himself to better provide for his family. He is providing a model for his children and helping to ensure they avoid the types of situations and decisions that landed him in Roederer Correctional Facility.



SUMMARY

Anecdotally, and as indicated by some of the studies cited in this document, men with access to resources have fewer barriers to becoming involved parents than their low-income or non-resident counterparts. Fatherhood programs can help men from socially marginalized and isolated communities by creating opportunities to establish bonding, bridging, and linking relationships. However, very little literature exists on the role of fatherhood programs in building social capital. This means researchers and practitioners have limited data to guide them in integrating a focus on social capital into their studies and interventions.

To advance the state of knowledge and identify best practices, it is important to build awareness of social capital and fully integrate efforts to build social capital into fatherhood programming as well as into other social and human services for fathers and families. The following sections include:

- Tips for building social capital in fatherhood programs; and
- Resources to guide practitioners and researchers in integrating social capital into their studies and interventions.

TIPS FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

- ❑ Consider including “building the social capital of fathers” as one of the explicitly stated program goals.
- ❑ Assess all aspects of participants’ social capital (bonding, bridging, and linking) as part of the intake process.
- ❑ Be intentional about informing and educating program participants about the importance of social capital and its positive implications for upward mobility and ongoing involvement with their children.
 - ✓ Solicit fathers’ input regarding the types of social capital they are most interested in establishing. This might include building bridges or linkages to prominent members of the community or strengthening bonds with their extended family, including maternal grandmothers, coparents, and coparents’ new partners who are contributing to their child’s growth and development.
 - ✓ Help fathers understand that improving their social capital may sometimes require ending negative relationships, particularly those that have contributed to maladaptive behavior or illegal behavior in the past.
- ❑ Emphasize the ways in which fathers are role models for their children and show them how the social capital that they acquire can create opportunities for their children. For example:
 - ✓ Encourage fathers to engage in activities that can also create opportunities for their children (e.g., volunteering, being present at their child’s school, and participating in other forms of civic engagement).

cont...

- ❑ Integrate peer mentoring and alumni groups as program components to facilitate ongoing supportive bonding relationships that last beyond the time fathers are enrolled in organizational interventions. Examples include the following:
 - ✓ Start a Facebook group for program alumni and/or encourage them to stay in touch with each other and the program via social media.
 - ✓ Organize occasional father-child or family events for alumni and current participants.
 - ✓ Produce a monthly newsletter with information for alumni and current participants. Feature stories about activities and achievements of alumni and their family.
 - ✓ Conduct periodic coaching and in-service trainings or make agency space available for peer mentoring or alumni meetings and gatherings.
- ❑ Make conscious, measurable efforts to increase fathers' bridging and linking capital. For example:
 - ✓ Identify and invite prominent people in the local community to serve as guest speakers and "friends" of the program, to provide opportunities for participants to meet and learn about different sectors of their community.
 - ✓ Highlight participants' accomplishments (e.g., nominate fathers for awards and other recognitions) to raise the profile of program graduates in the community.
 - ✓ Create opportunities for others to take interest in supporting, or connecting with, the fathers (e.g., invite employers and other prominent citizens to serve on the organization's board and/or meet with participants at special events).
 - ✓ Encourage staff, board members, and community partners to call upon their own connections to create connection opportunities for fathers.
 - ✓ Provide leadership training and opportunities for fathers to represent the program in the community as outreach workers or public speakers.
- ❑ Include measures of social capital (bonding, bridging, and linking) in program evaluations to document any changes in the social capital of fathers while they are in the program.
- ❑ Share evaluation findings or promising practices to inform the field of ways in which programs can build social capital and influence outcomes for fathers.



HELPFUL RESOURCES



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