



ENGAGING FATHERS

in Home Visiting Programs

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IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES⁴

With the four key principles in mind, here are some strategies that can help home visiting programs engage fathers. These, or similar strategies, can be adopted at every level of an organization and at each stage of services.

PROGRAM AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

1 ENSURE THAT ALL FORMS OF COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES ADDRESS BOTH PARENTS.

- If mothers' names and contact information are the only information available, staff should reach out to collect contact information for the fathers as well.

2 GATHER INFORMATION FROM BOTH PARENTS. THIS INCLUDES ASSESSMENT TOOLS, CONTACT LOGS, AND GOAL-SETTING FORMS.

- Even forms that are more geared to mothers, such as perinatal depression questionnaires, can be modified. Asking fathers to complete these forms can help them be more aware of their own perinatal mental health and the mothers' mental health and well-being.

3 ANALYZE THE FATHER-FRIENDLINESS OF PROGRAM MATERIALS AND THE SERVICE ENVIRONMENT.

- What messages might brochures distributed in the community, websites describing the program, and other communication materials convey to fathers?
- Pay attention to the diversity of the families depicted.
 - Do images displayed in brochures or posters represent all types of families in the community?
 - Do they include fathers of color, same sex fathers, and fathers who speak languages other than English?
- Most home visiting services naturally take place in the home, but parents will occasionally come to a program center for individual meetings or group activities, so it is important that all physical spaces and visual cues are welcoming to mothers and fathers.
 - Is the space welcoming to fathers?
 - What messages might paint colors, posters, artwork on the walls, or other physical cues within the agency convey about the inclusion of fathers?

⁴The strategies presented here draw on findings from Bellamy et al, 2020, and the author's experience in developing the Dads Matter-HV intervention, which included a review of the broader literature describing father engagement strategies in child and family service systems.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

HOME VISITOR STRATEGIES⁵

Use direct and intentional communication strategies with fathers.

1 BE SPECIFIC ABOUT INVITING FATHERS TO PARTICIPATE IN HOME VISITING SERVICES.

- A father may assume that home visiting services are not for him, or he may try to “stay out of the way” during a visit by watching TV in another room or offering to watch the baby while mom participates. Be clear that you expect him to join in.

2 HIGHLIGHT THE BENEFIT OF FATHERS’ PARTICIPATION FOR THEIR FAMILY’S WELL-BEING.

- Share information on benefits for fathers and families. For examples, see National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (2018b) and Sandstrom & Lauderback (2019).
- Prepare father-specific information packets to share with fathers.

3 EXPLAIN SERVICES CLEARLY SO FATHERS KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT.

- If fathers have never participated in child and family services or have had negative experiences with other services, take the opportunity to demystify home visiting and help alleviate potential anxieties or misperceptions.

4 MAKE EYE CONTACT DURING HOME VISITS AND ALL IN-PERSON CONVERSATIONS.

- Fathers often describe how service providers ask questions while looking at mothers, which cues mothers to lead and fathers to stay silent.

5 TALK DIRECTLY TO FATHERS.

- Some home visitors are surprised to realize how often they direct their conversation to mothers only or mothers first.

6 IF A FATHER MISSES A HOME VISITING SESSION:

- Leave a book he can read to his child.
- Have a packet ready with information, activities, or other information that was covered during the visit.
- Leave a note indicating that you missed him and hope he can be there for the next visit.
- Text or call him to find out how you can make it easier for him to participate or be there next time.

⁵The strategies presented in this section were described as successful by home visitors who participated in a father-engagement training session. The home visitors discussed ways in which they had effectively applied these father-engagement principles in their practice (Bellamy et al, 2020).

WORK TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH FATHERS OVER TIME

1 BE CONSISTENT. IT TAKES MORE THAN JUST ONE ATTEMPT TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP.

- If a father is not immediately responsive or doesn't participate right away, keep trying.
- Continuously offer support, be welcoming, thank fathers for participating in visits, and always ask if you can do anything more to help.

2 PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FATHERS TO INTERACT WITH OTHER DADS. SOME FATHERS MAY FEEL LIKE THEY ARE THE ONLY ONES STRUGGLING WITH PARENTING OR PARTICIPATING IN HOME VISITING SERVICES.

- Organize father-only group sessions or family-focused events where dads can meet other dads informally.
- Host toy-building workshops, story time, Father's Day celebrations, sports or field days, or other activities to provide opportunities for fathers to meet each other.
- Organize father mentoring or peer-support opportunities to connect fathers with one another on a more ongoing basis.
- Check your local area for fatherhood programs and build a relationship with them so you can confidently refer dads, particularly non-residential fathers.

3 RESPECT THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE OF FATHERS.

- All new parents (fathers and mothers) start their parenting journey with varying levels of knowledge, expertise, and experience.
- Start by exploring what a father already knows and does for his child. Identify and build on strengths rather than immediately focusing on deficits and needs in parenting.

4 ENCOURAGE MOTHERS TO SHARE INFORMATION ON HOW IMPORTANT FATHERS ARE IN THE LIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN.

- Mothers have a strong influence on fathers' roles in the family and their perception of themselves as parents. Don't assume that a mother does, or does not, want the father involved in home visits. In fact, you may need to work with her to help her understand the benefits of father involvement.

5 EXPLAIN HOW PARENTS CAN BENEFIT BY PROVIDING EACH OTHER WITH MUTUAL SUPPORT.

- Help mothers and fathers focus on what they share in common. **Nearly all parents can agree that they want the best for their child.**
- Help parents work together and understand the importance of their coparenting relationship for their child, especially if they are not in a romantic relationship or do not get along.
- Offer them tips on successful coparenting. (You could refer them to [Coparenting Tips for Dads](#), a tip sheet from the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2020.)

BUILD FLEXIBLE AND INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

1 CONSIDER AND WORK WITH FATHERS' SCHEDULES.

- Parents may trade off child care responsibilities and stagger their work schedules, which would prevent them both from participating in home visits during “typical” service hours.
- It may be necessary to meet on evenings, weekends, or have a visit schedule that shifts or moves depending on the week.

2 USE TECHNOLOGY, SUCH AS SPEAKER PHONES, FACETIME, OR ZOOM, WHEN NECESSARY.

- A variety of reasons—geographic distance, poor relationships, work schedules—may make it hard to schedule visits when both parents can attend in person. Use virtual technology to include the parent who cannot be there in person.

3 MAINTAIN A LIST OF SERVICES THAT YOU CAN REFER FATHERS TO IF THEY INDICATE THEY NEED EXTRA SUPPORT.

- Some typically needed services include job training; educational opportunities; fatherhood programs; or male-friendly health, mental health, and social services.

4 ENGAGE FATHERS IN HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES.

- Some men prefer learning by doing and may be less comfortable or engaged by talking or didactic teaching.
- Actively engage fathers in child development assessments, breastfeeding support, or childproofing the home.

BENEFITS FOR FATHERS WHO PARTICIPATE IN HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

Fathers who engage in home visiting programs have indicated that they value the services provided by home visitors and regard them as trusted sources of information.

Fathers have reported positive outcomes such as:

- ✓ Increased knowledge of child development and positive parenting practices.
- ✓ Enhanced ability to understand and use anger management skills.
- ✓ Improved communication with their coparents.
- ✓ More connections to employment, educational opportunities, and other community services and resources.

They attribute these positive outcomes to:

- ✓ Support and information received from home visitors.
- ✓ Peer support from other fathers and male program staff.

(Sandstrom & Lauderback, 2019)

HELPFUL RESOURCES

No one strategy will work with all fathers. But, if home visiting programs can organize their efforts to engage fathers around the principles and strategies described in this brief, they can expect to see an increase in father participation in home visiting services, which in turn increases the likelihood of improved mother and child well-being (Bellamy et al, 2020).

CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

[Tips to create a father-friendly organization](#)

INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH ON POVERTY

[Strategies for engaging fathers in family services](#)

NATIONAL HOME VISITING RESOURCE CENTER

[Father engagement in home visiting: Benefits, challenges, and promising strategies](#)

PARENTS AS TEACHERS

[Fatherhood Toolkit](#)

URBAN INSTITUTE

[Engaging Low-Income Fathers in Home Visiting: Approaches, Challenges, and Strategies](#)



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