



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance

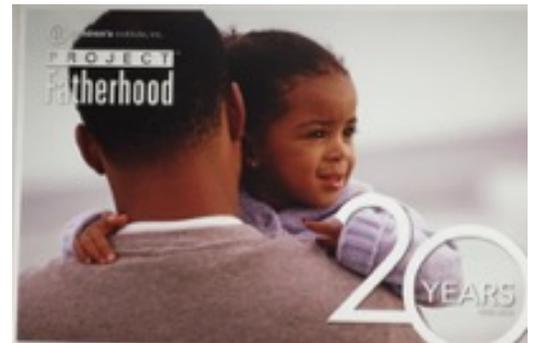


Spotlight on Children's Institute and Project Fatherhood

An NRC team visited the Project Fatherhood program of Children's Institute, Inc. (CII) in Los Angeles, California on March 20, 21, and 22, 2018. The team had the opportunity to talk with program staff, participants, graduates, and community partners. This NRC Spotlight highlights aspects of Project Fatherhood that may be of interest to other fatherhood practitioners.

Background

[Children's Institute, Inc. \(CII\)](#) has provided services for at-risk children and families in Los Angeles since 1906. In 1996, recognizing that fathers were often not included in these programs, Dr. Hershel Swinger, CII's Senior Vice-President of Clinical Services at the time, created [Project Fatherhood](#) to provide services that "enhance fathers' ability to be loving, responsible parents who are actively involved in their children's lives." With the award of the first of three federal fatherhood grants in 2006, Project Fatherhood was able to expand their services and provide training to help other community agencies deliver similar services. Working with partner agencies they have also formed the [Los Angeles Fatherhood Network \(LAFN\)](#), a collaboration dedicated to promoting the importance of father involvement in the lives of children.



Another significant achievement that builds on CII's long history of services to prevent child abuse and neglect, has been the creation of a partnership with Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). DCFS workers now participate in "father-friendly" training sessions provided by Project Fatherhood and routinely refer fathers with children in the child welfare system to the program.

Financial Support

CII has received three Responsible Fatherhood grants for Project Fatherhood (2006-2011, 2011-2015, and 2015-2020) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Additional support comes from CII board members, local partners and individual donors. The diversification of funding helps the program provide some services, such as housing and counseling, that may not be covered by federal funding.

Service Area

Project Fatherhood provides services throughout Los Angeles County at CII service centers in Watts, Long Beach, Torrance, Central LA, mid-Wilshire, and at various community partner locations.



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Demographics

Services are available for all fathers. In some cases, their children and partners or co-parents also receive services. Most of the fathers who participate in the program are Latino or African-American; 5-10 percent are Anglo or Asian; many of them face challenges as a result of criminal justice or gang involvement, trauma, poverty, lack of educational or training certifications, unreliable means of transportation, and homelessness. Some of the Latino fathers face additional challenges due to language barriers, cultural barriers, or fear of deportation if they are undocumented.

Staff

There are 18 full-time staff, including Fatherhood Specialists/Group Facilitators who conduct formal intake sessions, facilitate weekly fatherhood group sessions, and provide ongoing support for fathers; Care Coordinators who refer fathers for additional services as needed and maintain communication to inform them of upcoming events and activities; and a Child Focused Activities Coordinator. The team is led by Alan-Michael Graves (Director) and Edward Berumen and LeHenry Solomon (Program Supervisors). Several staff members are certified marriage and family therapists. The team meets every Friday to check-in on program activities, review individual cases, and provide support to each other.

All fatherhood groups are led by male facilitators, based on Dr. Swinger's belief that fathers are more comfortable and open to sharing their experiences in an all-male setting, but there are several female staff who play important roles in recruitment, intake, and ongoing support.

Program Philosophy

During the program visit, the NRFC team heard several phrases or themes repeated by staff members, which sum up the general program philosophy of Project Fatherhood. These include:

- *"We build trust and rapport with fathers from the first interaction ... we maintain a father-friendly, non-judgmental environment in all of our centers."*
- *"We tell fathers: 'We're not here to interpret or diagnose what you say, we're not trying to solve your problems; rather, we want to help you find your own way forward.'"*
- *"We are pro-women and pro-system ... we help fathers navigate public systems such as child welfare and child support, and we provide them with opportunities to vent their frustrations, but we are clear that there is no room here for disrespectful language when speaking about women or 'the system.'"*

Program Overview

The main program component is the provision of weekly Men in Relationships Group (MIRG) sessions (90 minutes each), based on 10 core topics developed by Dr. Swinger. All MIRG classes are "open entry/open exit." The expectation is that fathers will attend at least 12 MIRG sessions, but many continue for longer periods. Although some participants may be required to complete a set number of parenting classes to satisfy child welfare case requirements, the program does not provide completion certificates or schedule graduation ceremonies. This is because they do not want participants attending just to get a certificate. However, program staff will write detailed letters to social workers or judges outlining a father's participation and achievements in the program. These letters have come to carry increased weight as child welfare and court staff have seen the changes that fathers are making in their lives.



"There's no graduation from being a dad. Fatherhood exists way beyond a 12-week class. You can't get your kids back by sitting in the back of the class [thinking you'll get a certificate for attendance]."

Alan-Michael Graves
Project Fatherhood Director

Because the program focus is on improving child well-being, the program also provides services for participants’ children and their mothers or other significant adult caregivers. This includes:

- Child-focused activities for children of fathers attending MIRG sessions.
- Parenting and co-parenting classes for “significant others” (the child’s mother or other significant caregiver).
- Father-child activities.
- A “Just Beginning” program for fathers of children 0-3 years old.



Other services for fathers include:

- Individual and group counseling
- Job training programs
- Financial literacy classes
- Healthy marriage workshops
- Child enrichment activities
- Legal workshops and consultations
- Employment assistance
- Housing assistance

Recruitment and the role of partner agencies

Program referrals come from social workers at DCFS, attorneys or court officials at the Children’s Court that hears DCFS child welfare cases, community programs that host Project Fatherhood classes, CII programs working with mothers and children, and other LAFN members. To enhance opportunities for fathers to learn about available services, Project Fatherhood has a recruitment office onsite at the local Children’s Court.

Other partner agencies, who participate in monthly LAFN meetings and provide referrals or services for fathers, include:

- [Parents in Partnership \(PIP\)](#), a DCFS program staffed by mothers and fathers who previously had child welfare cases and now work to assist parents currently involved with DCFS cases.
- Chrysalis and Homeboy Industries provide referrals and employment services.
- First 5 LA maintain a parenting website with several pages of resources and tips for dads. The agency is also working with service providers in LA County through an Engaging Fathers project designed to align policies and practices in support of fathers’ successful reintegration with their children and families after incarceration.
- The National Compadres Network provides referrals to Project Fatherhood and technical assistance to agencies participating in the First 5 LA Engaging Fathers project.
- The Watts Labor Community Action Committee provides domestic violence prevention services.



Intake and Assessment

When a referral is received from a partner agency, one of the Care Coordinators will contact the father to gather preliminary information and schedule a formal intake appointment. They will determine some of the father’s immediate needs and, as appropriate, match them to a MIRG group and set a time for a formal intake session. Because Project Fatherhood is housed in an agency focused on services for young children, fathers who have a history of child molestation are not eligible for program services. Also excluded from participation are fathers with serious mental illnesses or fathers actively involved in a domestic violence case, although it may be possible to refer these men to external services. Fathers recovering from substance abuse can participate in the program, provided they have been in a drug treatment program and have at least six continuous months of sobriety.

Most intake sessions are scheduled with a facilitator of the MIRG group the father is assigned to, which enables an early focus on building trust and rapport to begin the process of forming a healing relationship with the father. Intake sessions follow a conversational format and are designed to gather basic information, including relationship and mental health history. As a result of this intentional relationship building process, more than 90% of fathers who complete intake follow through by attending a MIRG class.

“We are very careful and intentional in the questions we ask.”

Dr. Edward Berumen
Project Fatherhood Program Supervisor

Walk-ins or phone inquiries from potential participants are fielded by CII's front desk receptionist or other available staff. As the first point of contact for many fathers, the receptionist plays a key role. Noemi Vasquez served in the role for several years and did such a good job of connecting with fathers that she recently joined the Project Fatherhood team as one of the Care Coordinators.

"It's hard for many men to come in and ask for help, so we make sure staff are trained and available to meet with dads immediately when they come in."

Alan-Michael Graves
Project Fatherhood Director

Curriculum Groups

Men in Relationship Groups (MIRG) focus on self-growth, parenting, and relationships. The ten core components are:

1. Trust and Rapport
2. Loss and separation
3. Child abuse and neglect
4. Domestic Violence prevention
5. Punishment versus discipline
6. Substance abuse
7. Choosing a healthy mate
8. Normal child development
9. Rites of passage
10. Communicating needs

One of the two facilitators is generally a licensed marriage and family therapist. Groups are provided for English and Spanish speakers at convenient locations and times. Approximately 25 MIRG groups are held each week at CII centers and community locations such as Homeboy Industries and Pomona Jail, where one group is offered for fathers pre-sentencing and another for fathers within six months of release.

Facilitators meet for 30 minutes before and after each session to compare notes, identify issues that may need more attention, and review topics to emphasize. Because the groups are intentionally participant-driven, a pressing issue raised by a father during a session may take precedence. If there are child-focused activities planned for the evening, the child-focused activity coordinator will also join the pre- and post-sessions to share and hear about issues that may be impacting a child or his father.



Prior to leading a group, all facilitators must complete a 5-day facilitator training, followed by a three-month shadowing period and another 5-day refresher training. Continuing the emphasis on building trust and rapport, some facilitators will "self-disclose" during group sessions to give examples of personal issues they have faced, but they only discuss issues they have fully processed with their colleagues in training sessions or staff support meetings.

"We help fathers acknowledge their mistakes, make decisions to change, and learn new skills ... It doesn't happen overnight, it can take 6 months ... but there's nothing like the joy when they get their kids back."

Johnny Carrera
Fatherhood Specialist/Group Facilitator

Other Curriculum Groups

Just Beginning: As part of the national evaluation [Building Bridges and Bonds \(B3\)](#), Project Fatherhood is providing *Just Beginning* classes for fathers of young children (0-3 years old). Each session focuses on a specific skill:

- Noticing what your child is doing, understanding their emotional cues, and getting to know them.
- Following your child's lead, offering choices, and exploring things they are interested in.
- Talking to your child and describing things so they can make connections between objects and words.
- Encouraging and praising your child so they feel safe and loved as they grow and learn.
- Putting it all together to integrate these skills while you continue to interact with your child.

Parenting Beyond Conflict (scheduled to start Summer 2018): Project Fatherhood will provide an adapted version of the *Parenting Beyond Conflict* co-parenting curriculum to help separated and divorced parents explore strategies for effective communication and minimize the impact of conflict on their children.

Child Focused Activities

Ennio Deras has coordinated activities for children at CII and Project Fatherhood since 2007. Prior to that he had volunteered by sharing his artistic skills with children at the main CII center. He designs and oversees the provision of child-focused, age-appropriate activities for the children of participating fathers at various locations. This provides opportunities for fathers and their children to spend time together before and after group sessions. Ennio has observed that it also leads to increased program attendance when children encourage their dads to attend because they want to participate in more activities. *"When dads travel to and from sessions with their kids, it provides important bonding opportunities. It's nice to see kids come in and interact with their dads ... over time, you see more hugs and conversation [between them] ... Also, kids often form friendships with other kids, which creates a sense of family for both the kids and the dads ... and some of them get together outside the group."*



Ennio also works with other staff members to plan monthly workshops (e.g., kite making, cooking classes, how to use Adobe Photoshop) and other occasional events for fathers and their children. For instance, he recently facilitated a father-child activity with model airplanes and they also hold regular Fathers and Kids movie nights, the latest of which featured the movie *Coco* and included facilitated interaction before and after the movie. Other events to engage fathers and families have included a father-daughter tea party, father-son outings (e.g., hiking, fishing, bowling), family picnics, holiday events, and family nights.

Employment Services

Two of Project Fatherhood's most important partners are Chrysalis and Homeboy Industries.



[Chrysalis](#) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping homeless and low-income individuals find a pathway to self-sufficiency. Their core curriculum is designed to improve job search skills, self-confidence, and employability. By offering "a hand up, rather than a hand out," they provide participants with the resources and support needed to find and retain employment. The agency specializes in social enterprises that provide transitional jobs to help their clients gain real-world skills and develop the experience needed to find and retain long-term employment. For example, many

Project Fatherhood participants have worked with street maintenance teams that provide street sweeping, pressure washing, and graffiti removal services throughout Los Angeles County.



[Homeboy Industries](#) provides hope, training, and support for formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women. Participants have the opportunity to improve their confidence and self-esteem while learning skills to provide for their families. Project Fatherhood staff work closely with the organization and provide MIRC classes for fathers at Homeboy's downtown location. Homeboy provides 18-month work opportunities in six social enterprises where trainees are paid to learn soft skills, such as administration and customer service, and vocational skills from solar panel installation to pastry baking or catering. Participants are required to spend part of their time at Homeboy working on themselves by taking advantage of an array of on-site support services that include

education, therapy, tattoo removal, substance abuse treatment, legal assistance, and job placement services.

Other Support Services

Care Coordinators and Fatherhood Specialists work with fathers on an individual basis to help them move toward their goals. Support services include assistance with child support, co-parenting, and legal issues. Referrals are provided to community partners as needed.

In the words of the fathers

- *"Before I began participating in Project Fatherhood, I didn't know how to tell my kids that I loved them because my own father never told me that. Now I realize that to have the opportunity to tell a child that you love them is an honor."*
- *"I never met or lived with my father. I would never want my son to grow up without me in his life. Now [although his mother and I are separated], I visit him often and spend all my free time with him. I have a job that I like, and he knows that I will always be there for him."*
- *"I've learned a lot about being a better father."*