

Engagement of Fathers from Birth

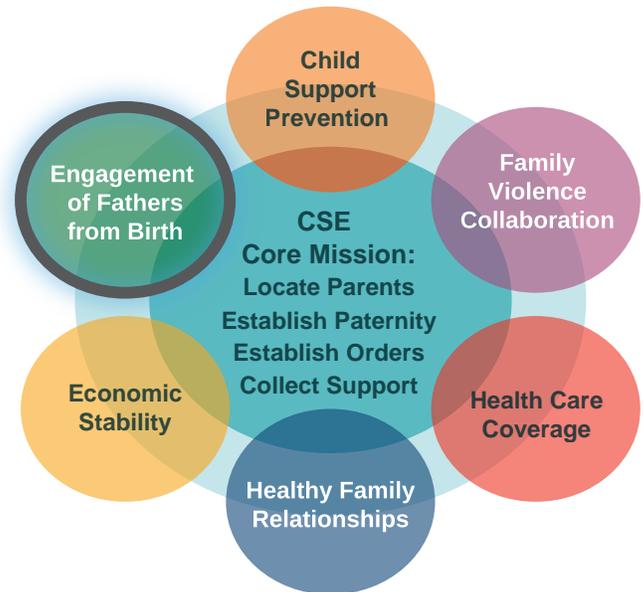
The child support program can increase child support payments by positively engaging with fathers early on, encouraging fathers to be more involved in their children’s lives, and helping them overcome obstacles to supporting their children—reducing the likelihood that they will build up child support debt.

Why should the child support program engage with fathers early on in their children’s lives?

No other program has such extensive contact with fathers. The child support program works with noncustodial fathers from the time their children are born until their children reach the age of majority. By engaging with fathers from the beginning, the child support program can reduce the likelihood that noncustodial parents will fall out of contact with their children or accrue unmanageable child support debts.

The birth of a child is a “magic moment” for nearly all parents, whether they are married or not, and parents want the best for their new baby.¹ Research shows that noncustodial fathers care about their children and want to be involved.² Fathers who are involved with their children are more likely to pay child support, and fathers who pay child support are more likely to stay involved.³ These findings highlight the importance of having child support programs encourage and facilitate the engagement of fathers in their children’s lives.

Increasing father involvement can benefit children, but it must not come at the cost of family safety. Most fathers are not violent, but some are. Efforts to increase father involvement must be coupled with safeguards to prevent the potential for family violence.



By partnering with domestic violence programs, child support agencies can reduce the risk of harm. Programs to improve father involvement must have trained staff to screen and continually monitor for family violence. Many incorporate education about the negative effects of family violence into their fatherhood programs to help prevent family violence.

How can increasing fathers’ engagement improve child support outcomes?

Studies show that programs designed to increase father involvement can improve child support outcomes.⁴ As discussed below, engaging low-income fathers in fatherhood programs can lead to more child support collections. Engaging incarcerated fathers can lead to more paternities established, while engaging fathers after they are released from prison can reduce recidivism and increase earnings.⁵ Services that help parents develop joint parenting plans, such as mediation, can increase the involvement of noncustodial parents with their children, improve the relationship between parents, and increase child support payments.⁶

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What does the child support program do to improve fathers' engagement?

Child support programs operate in-hospital paternity establishment programs to ensure that every child has a legal father—a natural intervention point to engage fathers. Establishing paternity ensures that a child has the same rights and privileges as children born to married parents. Research shows that 80 percent of unwed parents are romantically involved at the time of their child's birth, but 60 percent of these relationships dissolve within 5 years.⁷ By establishing paternity, the father has not only an on-going legal responsibility to financially support the child but also a legal right to be emotionally involved in the child's life. The child support program can also partner with programs designed to engage fathers during pregnancy and at the birth of the child, or conduct outreach through prenatal clinics, home visiting programs, the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) Program, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, public schools, and child care providers.

In addition, many child support programs work closely with fatherhood programs and other community-based programs that promote father involvement, referring fathers to these programs and providing customized child support services to program participants. Child support programs also provide enhanced child support services to various groups of fathers, such as military fathers, veterans, incarcerated fathers, and formerly incarcerated fathers, to help them overcome barriers to staying involved with their children. Over the past decade, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has issued over a hundred competitive grants to support collaborations serving fathers, including veterans, incarceration and reentry collaborations.

Examples of ways state child support programs are promoting fathers' engagement:

Delaware—Military Liaison

What it does: Delaware's Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE) has an employee who has been serving as its military liaison since 2002. The military liaison works with the Delaware National Guard and various reserve branches to help address the unique challenges that service members face with regard to child support and paternity establishment. DCSE also helped develop materials for civilian-soldier noncustodial parents who are being deployed, which is available on its web site and various military web sites.

Results: The military liaison makes regular presentations at events sponsored by the Delaware National Guard and works one-on-one with military families to address their child support issues. The liaison also represents DCSE at Stand Downs and at pre-deployment activities.

Maryland—Child Support, Head Start and Child Care Collaboration

What it did: Many local child support programs in Maryland collaborated with Head Start and child care facilities to educate parents in these programs about the child support program. Different approaches were developed, including kiosks, "Hot Topic" reference cards, pamphlets, public television announcements, trainings of child care professionals, and on-site classes for parents.

Results: Over 10,000 individuals were informed about the child support program using approaches discussed above during the three-year project. Approximately 300 30-second spots ran on public television.⁸

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Massachusetts—Fathers in the Criminal Justice System

What it does: Massachusetts has a multi-faceted criminal justice program that involves: identifying inmates and parolees with child support cases and assisting them with modifications, paternity testing, and paternity establishment; conducting general education sessions regarding child support responsibilities; meeting individually with inmates upon request; and providing child support information (including case information as requested) to parents who are in reentry and substance abuse programs.

Results: The percentage of inmates receiving a reduction in their child support order increased significantly, as did the percentage of inmates with paternity established.⁹

Minnesota—Fostering Actions to Help Earnings and Responsibility (The FATHER Project)

What it does: The FATHER Project empowers fathers to overcome barriers that prevent them from supporting their children economically and emotionally. It is part of Goodwill/Easter Seals Minnesota. Hennepin County child support staff holds regular office hours at the FATHER Project. They screen all participants' case information, provide child support services, and coordinate case reviews.

Results: In 2009, 380 noncustodial parents were served by the FATHER Project and they paid over \$100,000 in child support. An evaluation showed that this project generated \$3.41 in higher earnings, child support payments, and taxes in the long run for every dollar invested in the project.¹⁰

Ohio—Real Dads

What it does: Real Dads helps fathers overcome employment barriers and problems with maintaining a relationship with their children. It is operated by Lighthouse Youth Services, a multi-service organization in Cincinnati. The Hamilton County child support program refers about 25 parents a month to the program and dedicates one staff member to manage the specialized caseload.

Results: Almost all the participants were not paying child support when they entered the program, but more than half were making payments by the end of the program.

Texas—Maps for New Dads

What it does: The Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) publishes and widely distributes Maps for New Dads, a prenatal handbook for fathers on what to expect from and how to care for a new baby. The agency also offers paternity establishment and father involvement training for WIC, Early Head Start and other service providers.¹¹

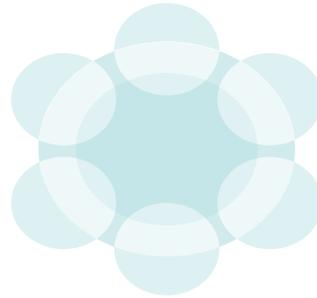
Results: This effort has proven to be so popular that the Texas Legislature overwhelmingly passed legislation in 2011 requiring that Maps for New Dads be made available to all WIC prenatal clients (more than 100,000 annually). OAG has also trained all 12 sites in the Texas Nurse Family Partnership on establishing paternity and engaging fathers in home visits. All nurses in the Texas NFP are certified by the OAG to assist parents with paternity acknowledgment.

Washington—Bright Start

What it did: As part of an OCSE-funded grant project, the Washington Division of Child Support conducted a program called Bright Start, which offered free genetic testing to parents who did not sign a paternity affidavit at the hospital.¹²

Results: The Bright Start program evaluation showed near universal support among hospital staff who felt that the genetic tests “filled a hole” in the paternity affidavit program.

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Examples provided in the *Promoting Child Well-Being & Family Self-Sufficiency* Fact Sheet Series are funded using child support program matching funds and other funding sources.

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