



# The Power of Fathers in the Lives of Children

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Fathers play a very important role in families and communities. Children need their fathers; they are caregivers, protectors, and providers.

**When fathers are positively and actively involved in their children's lives, the children lead happier, more fulfilled lives, and they fare better across the spectrum of child outcomes than do children with disengaged fathers. Service providers who work with children and families must recognize the value of fathers, engage with them, and encourage them to be highly involved in their children's upbringing. Recognizing and embracing the power of fathers leads to not only safer, healthier families, but also a safer, healthier society.**

## BACKGROUND

In most cases, fathers' involvement in their children's lives is a protective factor against child abuse and neglect, whereas fathers' absence contributes to an increased risk of child maltreatment (Dubowitz, 2006; English, Brummel, & Martens, 2009; Jenkins & Kinney, 2009). When fathers are highly involved in their children's lives, mothers experience less depression which is associated with less severe discipline by mothers (English, et al., 2009). Children whose fathers are positively involved in their lives are also less likely to experience neglect (English, et al., 2009; Jenkins & Kinney, 2009).

Additionally, when fathers are engaged in their children's lives, their children are more likely to have positive child outcomes which contribute to a decreased likelihood that children will: experience mental illness, self-harm, and complete suicide; exhibit risky and delinquent behaviors such as using drugs and alcohol, and engaging in early sexual activity; commit crimes as children and in adulthood; become teen parents; and experience domestic violence in adulthood (Jenkins & Kinney, 2009; National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement [NCPFCE], 2013; Martinez, Rider, Cayce, Sawyer, & Williams, 2011). This is true regardless of whether or not involved fathers live with or apart from their children (Jenkins & Kinney, 2009). In short, fathers can help end cycles of violence, substance abuse, crime, and teen pregnancy by simply playing a positive active role in the lives of their children. Children with positively involved fathers are less likely to experience violence in and outside of the home and less likely to exhibit risky and delinquent behaviors. They also fare better across every

*“My father didn't tell me how to live; he lived, and let me watch him do it.”*

**-CLARENCE B. KELLAND**

measure of child well-being than do children with absent and uninvolved fathers (Anthes, 2010; Dubowitz, 2006; English, et al., 2009).

### **Cognitive and Physical Development**

Children whose fathers are involved in their lives typically score better on measures of verbal and mathematical ability, and exhibit greater problem-solving and social skills (NCPFCE, 2013). Research has shown that fathers tend to engage in play and communicate with their children differently than mothers. They tend to engage in more physical and stimulating play with their children, and encourage more exploration and independent behaviors (Anthes, 2010; NCPFCE, 2013). In these ways, fathers' play with their children enhances their children's cognitive abilities as well as their physical competencies (Anthes, 2010; NCPFCE, 2013; Ladd, 2000). One study even found that fathers' presence also increased mothers' cognitive stimulation of their toddlers. Furthermore, when fathers take a positive role in children's education, students have more positive attitudes about school and are more likely to perform well academically (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005; NCPFCE, 2013). The positive effects that involved fathers have on their children's cognitive development continue to have an impact throughout their lives (NCPFCE, 2013).

### **Self-Concept and Identity**

When fathers play an active role in their children's upbringing, children feel that they are valued; feeling valued promotes their positive self-esteem and greater sense of meaning (NCPFCE, 2013). Having a positive, engaged relationship with their fathers helps teen boys and girls develop a positive self-image and a strong sense of who they are, making them less susceptible to peer pressure (NCPFCE, 2013). Fathers help boys develop a healthy sense of what it means to be male (NCPFCE, 2013). Fathers typically have a greater impact than mothers on their daughters' ability to trust and relate well to other males throughout their lives (Nielsen,

2008). Girls who experience good fathering are often more self-reliant and self-confident than daughters who have experienced poor fathering (Nielsen, 2008). For example, girls with loving, involved fathers are less likely to develop eating disorders (Nielsen, 2008).

### **Emotional Regulation and Social Skills**

According to research, high levels of father involvement are positively correlated with children's sociability, confidence, and self-control (Anthes, 2010). Mothers and fathers socialize and discipline their children in different and complementary ways, which benefits children by preparing them for the diverse experiences they will have outside of the home (NCPFCE, 2013). Fathers can play an important role by setting a good example for their children, teaching them appropriate behavior, and enforcing healthy limits. When fathers show emotional support to their children they tend to be more sensitive to the needs of others (Green, 2000). Indeed, children with involved fathers tend to face fewer challenges in forming peer relationships than children deprived of father involvement, and are less likely to exhibit delinquent and antisocial behaviors (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005).

## **PROBLEM**

Despite the important role fathers play in their children's well being, they continue to be underserved. In a society that has traditionally associated the role of men with the role of provider and protector, many fathers today believe that if they cannot provide financially for their children, then they have nothing valuable to contribute to their children's lives (National Fatherhood Initiative [NFI], 2014). Child- and family-serving systems often reinforce this notion, despite the data showing that financial support alone does not improve child outcomes (Maxwell, et al., 2011). Child welfare agencies and professionals often disregard the importance of fathers' involvement in their children's lives (Maxwell, et al., 2011). In fact, caseworker

bias is considered to be the most widely researched barrier to fathers' involvement in child welfare case planning (Kendall & Pilnik, 2010).

There are many reasons why fathers can be difficult to engage with and even reach. Mothers' resistance to giving information about non-resident fathers is not uncommon (Kendall & Pilnik, 2010). Sometimes fathers are struggling with personal issues which make them more difficult to reach and engage (Kendall & Pilnik, 2010). For example, fathers living in poverty may be homeless or move frequently due to housing instability, and as a result, frequently change their address and phone number. Or some fathers may work under the table due to criminal histories, which can make them more difficult to track down. Some fathers may have a mistrust of social services agencies, or be defensive about behaviors like substance abuse and therefore avoid contact with child and family welfare workers. Some fathers are difficult to engage because they do not see parenting as their responsibility (Scourfield, 2014). Whatever the case, these fathers who are difficult to engage are often times the fathers who need the most support (NCPFCE, 2013).

*The fathers who are most difficult to engage – because of challenges such as poverty, legal status, substance abuse -- are those who need the most support.*

## SOLUTION

Agencies, organizations, and individuals serving children and families need to better engage with fathers and support their involvement in their children's lives. At the system level, we must recognize that "although many fathers struggle with inexperience as a parent, substance abuse, incarceration, or poverty, none of those things limits a father's ability to love his child, or a child's ability to feel loved and connected" (Kendall and Pilnik, 2010, p. 7). Fathers' involvement in their children's lives can simultaneously bring risks and resources, just as mothers do, and it is true that in some cases the risks of engaging fathers outweigh the potential benefits (Scourfield, 2014). However, this should be determined through thorough assessment, not assumed (Maxwell, Scourfield, Holland, Featherstone, & Lee, 2012). Paternal relatives should also be considered as potential resources for children (Jenkins & Kinney, 2009).

Occupational culture and caseworker bias have been shown to contribute to the lack of engagement with fathers (Kendall & Pilnik, 2010; Jenkins & Kinney, 2009). Organizations and agencies serving children and families can utilize tools such as the National Fatherhood



Initiative's Father Friendly Check-Up to evaluate the ways in which their operations are, and are not, encouraging fathers' involvement in the services and programs they offer (NFI, 2010).

Fathers who need the most support are very often the most difficult to engage (NCPFCE, 2013). Therefore, continuing to require caseworkers to make "reasonable efforts" to locate and engage fathers is not sufficient. It should be standard practice for child welfare workers to make active and ongoing efforts to locate and engage not only with children's fathers, but with their paternal relatives as well, and to document those efforts to promote accountability. Fathers and mothers should have equal access to supportive services and be equally involved in decision-making about their children's lives and wellbeing. Child welfare agencies can encourage fathers' engagement by utilizing practice models such as Family Group Decision Making (Jenkins & Kinney, 2009).

Multiple studies have shown that child welfare workers frequently have biased perceptions of fathers, and are often inconsistent in their efforts to locate and engage with them (Jenkins & Kinney, 2009). However, studies have also shown that training specific to father engagement can improve their performance in this area (Jenkins & Kinney, 2009). Caseworker training, including educating workers about men's learning styles and help seeking behaviors, is one way to reduce caseworker bias and improve father engagement (Maxwell, et al., 2012; Martinez, et al., 2011).

There are many ways in which those who serve children and families can encourage fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives. Fathers who are involved with their children as infants are more likely to stay actively involved throughout their children's lives; therefore, programs should encourage father involvement as early as pregnancy and

infancy (Anthes, 2010). Another way we can support father engagement is by encouraging positive relationships between mothers and fathers. The strongest predictor of father involvement is the quality of the father's relationship with the mother, regardless of whether or not they are married (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010). When fathers feel that mothers have confidence in their parenting skills, they feel more satisfied with their parental role and are more motivated to continue to engage in their children's lives (Anthes, 2010; NCPFCE, 2013).

Additionally, community leaders and organizers should make deliberate efforts to offer community programs and activities that are inclusive of fathers. Outreach and advertising for family programming should target fathers just as much as mothers. For example, posters and promotional materials should include images of fathers. Recognizing that barber shops are often trusted spaces where men can discuss personal and public issues, the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse [NRFC] has taken a unique approach to father outreach. NRFC partners with neighborhood barber shops across the country in an initiative called Fatherhood Buzz, aimed at increasing awareness about responsible fatherhood and parenting issues, and increasing families' access to support (NRFC, n.d.). Community leaders and organizers can also offer programs and activities that are specifically targeted to fathers and their children. Examples include fathers' groups and father-child activity days that support the ways fathers typically play with and socialize their children (Ladd, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

Fathers' active involvement in their children's lives reduces their risk of child abuse and neglect, and supports positive child outcomes which contribute to a decreased likelihood that children will engage in risky and criminal behaviors, not just in their youth, but in

adulthood. Fathers' positive engagement not only benefits their children, it benefits the fathers as well. Fathers who recognize their importance in their children's lives are more satisfied with themselves, and they are more cognizant of emotional situations outside the home, such as in the workplace (Ladd, 2000). Being engaged in their children's lives expands the range and depth of their experiences as fathers, but also as partners and community members (Ladd, 2000). By being highly involved in their children's lives, fathers can not only reduce cycles of violence and other social ills within families, but they have the power to reduce harmful patterns within their communities and our society as a whole.

*Community leaders and organizers should make deliberate efforts to offer community programs and activities that are inclusive of fathers.*

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## CALLS TO ACTION

*Try these ten steps to help fathers in your community connect with the children in their lives:*

### FOR PROVIDERS TO BETTER WELCOME AND ENGAGE FATHERS:

- 1 Learn about male help-seeking and learning styles.** When meeting with a father, try to keep the conversation focused on solutions and active problem-solving.
- 2 Regularly ask caregivers, “Will Dad be part of the meeting?” or “What meeting time would work best for you and your child’s father?”**
- 3 Speak with and to fathers-not about or over them in ways that can exclude them.** Seek their input and opinions before meetings if they cannot attend.
- 4 Educate fathers and mothers about the importance of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives.** Address barriers to fathers’ participation.
- 5 Request training on father engagement, and encourage your organization or agency to assess its “father-friendliness”** using the National Fatherhood Initiative’s Father Friendly Check-Up (available at [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)).

### FOR ANYONE HELPING FATHERS CONNECT WITH THEIR CHILDREN:

- 1 Identify and reaffirm fathers’ strengths.** Ask fathers how they think they can benefit their children.
- 2 Reinforce to mothers the value of children’s interactions with their fathers (unless there are safety or absence realities), especially in co-parenting situations.** Encourage parents not to complain about or put down one another in front of their children.
- 3 Fathers and their children often relate better while doing something active as opposed to just talking,** so encourage father-child outings or suggest joint projects they can take up.
- 4 Support children’s positive relationships and interactions with paternal relatives.**
- 5 Offer parenting classes, fathers’ support groups, and classes on co-parenting,** and provide fathers with informational materials about childhood development.

SCAN, with support from Verizon, is taking a particular interest in the role of fathers and other male role models in the lives of children. SCAN has developed a special outreach campaign focused on educating and empowering men to understand how they can strengthen their connections with the children in their lives as well as their role in helping children build interpersonal and conflict resolution skills that support the child’s resiliency and prevent family violence for generations to come.

The information and tools offered by SCAN will be a valuable resource to educate, equip and inspire men while helping to prevent child abuse and neglect in our community. In addition to training workshops, outreach includes fact sheets, online resources and more.

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