



The X-Y Factor: Engaging Fathers Using the Protective Factors

On June 20, 2018, CBLCC (Children's Bureau Learning & Coordination Center) hosted a Digital Dialogue with Christopher Brown, President of the National Fatherhood Initiative and 118 individuals from around the country who joined the call.

Setting the Context: Why Focus Specifically on Fathers?

Despite the [well-documented benefits of father engagement](#) for children, many efforts to strengthen families focus on reaching and serving mothers but do not engage fathers. Brown cited a number of reasons for this, including the following:

- Many existing parenting programs and interventions have been designed to serve mothers. A global review of 199 parenting interventions¹ showed that efforts rarely target or make an effort to include fathers.
- Many providers lack the capacity to engage fathers. As noted above, programs are often designed for mothers. Staff in much of the social services sector are women.
- Cultural norms about parenting tend to send the message that parenting is about mothers. Even as fathers have increased the time they spend caring for their children, cultural norms around parenting continue to send the message that parenting is largely the job of mothers. Providers of all kinds—in child care, education, and health care, among many others—tend to focus on mothers. It's not surprising, then, that fathers often see the word "parent" as a code word for mothers. That's why fathers need programs and other resources that speak to them specifically and attend specifically to their parenting.

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Brown discussed the Center for the Study of Social Policy's five [Strengthening Families](#) protective factors and described how each can be used effectively when engaging fathers.

Strengthening Families: Five Protective Factors

Parental
resilience

Social
connections

Knowledge
of Parenting
and Child
Development

Concrete
Support in
Times of Need

Social and
Emotional
Competence of
Children

For more information on the protective factors, visit the [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#).

1 Panter-Brick, C., Burgess, A., Eggerman, M., McAllister, F., Pruett, K., & Leckman, J. F. (2014). Practitioner review: Engaging fathers—Recommendations for a game change in parenting interventions based on a systematic review of the global evidence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(11), 1187–1212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12280>

Protective Factors Through the Lens of Fatherhood

PARENTAL RESILIENCE

Brown described parental resilience as the ability to manage stress and to function well when faced with challenges, adversity, and trauma. Addressing this factor with parents involves addressing parents' individually developmental histories, the psychological resources that they have for resilience, and their capacity to empathize with themselves, and with others, as well. Brown highlighted these special considerations when working with fathers:

- Remember that fathers move through a different developmental trajectory than mothers do. Masculinity is the primary framework upon which the male psyche is constructed.
- Many fathers who are at risk for abusing or neglecting their children did not develop positive attachments to their fathers and to other men. They also did not develop what may be called "pro-fathering" attitudes and values.
- When working with fathers, focus on creating positive attachments in three specific and distinct areas:
 - » Between the father and the child
 - » Between the father and the mother
 - » Between the father and other adults—especially other men that can serve as positive role models
- Start the work with expectant fathers to lay the foundations for healthy attachment with their children.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Brown noted that social connections refer to positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support. He emphasized that networks of support are key to this particular factor. They are essential to parents, and also offer opportunities for people to give back to their community, which is both an important part of self-esteem and a benefit for the community. Compared to mothers, most fathers are raised to build networks for the exchange of material information and goods, not for emotional and spiritual support.

Brown suggested the following strategies when working with fathers to build social connections:

- Work with fathers in a group setting as much as possible, and create a safe space where fathers can make a powerful connection with other men—often for the first time in their lives.
- Give fathers opportunities to continue to learn and stay connected after a formal program ends. This further deepens social connections by keeping them engaged in a positive environment or network.
- Pay particular attention to engaging fathers who have been socially isolated or involved in networks that are characterized by antisocial behavior.

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI)

Founded in 1994, NFI focuses on raising awareness of the impact of fathers on child well-being, producing programs and services for service providers to engage fathers in children's lives. NFI has trained more than 29,000 staff representing more than 7,000 organizations around the country. Recently, NFI has been working with state-based networks that use prevention planning frameworks. To pursue their mission and vision, NFI uses the 3E strategy as their theory of change:

- Educate: NFI educates and inspires all Americans, especially fathers, through social media, earned media, research, and free resources and services.
- Equip: NFI equips organizations and communities with fatherhood programs and resources, and through training, planning, and technical assistance services.
- Engage: NFI engages organizations and communities to mobilize at the micro- and macro- level to increase father involvement in children's lives.

KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Brown described this protective factor as understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development.

He observed that because of cultural norms in the United States today, many boys and young men are not adequately prepared in the basics of parenting. He recommended that fathers be involved in the day-to-day care of their children from the moment their children are born. Brown offered these strategies and considerations:

- Build fathers' knowledge and skill in two areas: Child discipline and child development.
- Provide them with action-oriented steps they can take to help their child develop appropriately.

CONCRETE SUPPORTS IN TIMES OF NEED

Brown highlighted the importance of access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges.

He noted that the key to building this particular protective factor is parents' willingness to seek support. Brown observed that this is probably the most challenging protective factor to build in fathers; just as men are not raised to raise children, they are not raised to seek help. Many men view seeking help as a sign of weakness and not of strength. Even fathers in the most vulnerable families are often reluctant to connect with sources of support in their community that can help their families meet their most basic needs.

Brown suggested the following strategies for working with fathers on accessing concrete supports:

- Present seeking help to fathers as a sign of strength.
- Connect seeking help to fathers' traditional role of being a provider and a protector of their children. By doing that, you reduce the risk that they will view seeking help as a threat to their role and their masculinity.

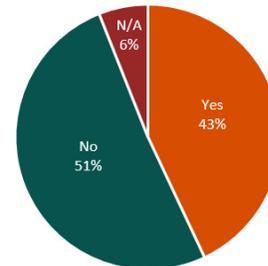
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

Brown defined social and emotional competence as family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.

He observed that children's social-emotional competence is deeply affected by the quality of their relationship with their primary attachment figures, usually their parents. Healthy development is threatened when the families of young children face multiple problems and stressors, particularly ones that are chronic as opposed to acute. Father absence is a stressor, Brown noted, and it is linked to a host of other stressors. By working to

Participant Poll Responses

Poll 1: Does your organization have a dedicated program or service for dads?



Poll Question 2: What challenges do you face in engaging fathers?

Responses to this question clustered in four areas:

- Incarceration
- Lack of support
- Relationship with mother
- Workforce bias

Poll Question 3: Based on what you've heard today, what is one change you will make to effectively engage fathers to build the protective factors?

Responses to this question clustered in four areas:

- Frame communication differently
- Identify the father early
- Develop father support groups
- Validate fathers

connect fathers with their children and helping them stay connected, especially when they don't live with their children, you reduce the risk that a child will suffer from these stressors. Brown highlighted these special considerations when working with fathers:

- To address this factor, it is vital to address the relationships between fathers and mothers. It is the most significant relationship in most children's lives and it serves as a blueprint that they follow for developing their own relationships as they mature.
- Improving that mother-father relationship is critical to preventing disruptions between children and their primary caregivers, and intervening and repairing those disruptions when they do occur.
- Mothers also need resources that help them better understand the importance of father involvement, and they can co-parent effectively. This is especially true in cases where parents are not romantically involved or living together.

Question and Answer

WHAT STEPS CAN AGENCIES TAKE TO IMPROVE FATHER ENGAGEMENT?

Brown: It's really important for any agency or organization focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect to create a culture within their organization that supports father involvement. We have a free downloadable resource on our website called the Father Friendly Checkup that's designed to help people take that first step—assessing their organization's level of father friendliness or readiness to engage fathers. From that assessment, they can development specific no-cost and low-cost tactics to create a culture that can support the successful engagement of fathers.

CAN THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN'S MOTHERS BE A CHALLENGE?

Brown: Often, people assume that if they just add a fatherhood program or fatherhood resources, they can help a father independently gain greater access to his kids and become more involved in their lives. Many times, no matter how great a father becomes in terms of developing pro-fathering knowledge, attitudes, and values, a mother or other primary caregiver can prevent access to his children.

Unnecessarily restrictive gatekeeping is when the mother either consciously or unconsciously restricts a father's access to his children when it's not necessary. There are some cases, of course, when the father might be a danger to the mother or to the child, but in the vast majority of cases, that's not what's happening. Often, anger or some other conflict has caused the mother to act in this particular way. It's really important to provide resources and even programming for mothers that are specifically designed to increase father involvement.

HOW CAN YOU MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS WHEN A PARENT IS INCARCERATED?

Brown: Having an incarcerated parent, mother or father—though 92% of all incarcerated parents are fathers—is in and of itself an adverse childhood experience, and it increases the risk of a range of poor outcomes. Research shows that when an incarcerated parent is connected to their children and family prior to release, it reduces recidivism, and that's important for breaking the intergenerational cycles of incarceration.

Through the Second Chance Act, the federal government has recognized the importance of working with and supporting children of incarcerated parents, going into corrections facilities and corrections-related facilities, and providing parenting programming and other resources to fathers and mothers.

CBLCC offers a variety of resources aimed at supporting families impacted by incarceration. [Visit our website to learn more.](#)



HOW DO YOU HANDLE MULTIPLE FATHERS WITHIN A FAMILY UNIT?

Brown: Many of our organizational partners work with fathers who have children by multiple mothers. That challenge has to be approached on an individual basis. Some of these fathers may have good, amicable relationships with one or more of the mothers. A good starting place is to help him to become more involved in the relationship with his children where the relationship with the mother is best. Start with one mother, and just help him build relationships over time with as many of his children as possible.

HOW DO YOU ATTEND TO FATHERS IN THE WORKFORCE?

Brown: Unless your focus is on unemployed fathers, you're bound to run into challenges with fathers' work schedules. The organizations that are most successful come up with innovative ways to provide services either where fathers are (such as where they work) or at times that are convenient for fathers to attend (such as evenings and weekends). The challenge is your own staff's work schedules. In some cases, organizations use volunteers to provide services during non-work hours. Many times staff who are dedicated to this work are willing to work evenings and some weekends, particularly if you can flex their time. Showing fathers your willingness to meet them where they are also addresses one of the biggest and probably most significant challenge in serving fathers, which is recruiting fathers into programs and then retaining their participation.

Additional Resources:

- [Integrating Approaches that Prioritize and Enhance Father Engagement](#), an Information Memorandum of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF-ACF-IM-18-01), October 17, 2018
- [Father Involvement and the Five Protective Factors](#), National Fatherhood Initiative
- National Fatherhood Initiative: <https://www.fatherhood.org/>
- [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#)
- [Core Meanings of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors](#), Center for the Study of Social Policy
- [Prevention Resource Guide](#), Children's Bureau
- [CBLCC Topics page on Father Engagement](#)

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