

NATIONAL CENTER FOR
**Family &
Parent
Leadership**

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5 TIPS FOR ENGAGING FATHERS AS PARENT LEADERS

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SHARED LANGUAGE & DEFINITIONS

The National Center for Family and Parent Leadership refers to:

Fathers: as all male identified caregivers. Including biological, foster and stepdads, as well as expecting fathers and other male caregiving kin. This also includes fathers who may not live with in the home their child.

Parents and Families: interchangeably to mean all adults with a primary role in caring for a child. This includes biological, adoptive, foster, and stepparents, grandparents, and other caregiving kin, and legal and informal guardians. It could also include parents who do not live with the child and are still involved in raising the child and thus have important perspectives as a parent.

Family and Parent Leadership: a set of intentional practices, values, and steps that systems, agencies, and organizations adopt to build the structures that allow parents to influence systemic decisions about early childhood services and programs they use or need.

When parents are supported as leaders, the benefits are clear: families are stronger; children, families and programs have better outcomes; and systems are more effective because families help shape decisions to be more equitable, culturally relevant, and customer centric. Far too often, fathers and other male caregivers are not engaged in parent leadership efforts in early childhood. To strengthen systems-building efforts, early childhood stakeholders must be more intentional about how they recruit, engage, and retain fathers as a part of family and parent leadership opportunities. This resource outlines five important tips and strategies for effectively reaching and engaging fathers whose voices are often underrepresented in shaping the early childhood system.

FATHERS AS PARENT LEADERS

As a part of an equitable strategy, organizations, and institutions should be intentional about their goals and strategies for recruiting and engaging fathers in parent leadership efforts. Fathers bring their own unique perspectives and experiences with early childhood programs and services, including those related to health care and early care and education. Engaged fathers can have a tremendous impact on childhood outcomes and communities. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge and unpack the historical context of the roles men and fathers have assumed in our nation to inform outreach and engagement strategies.

CONTACT

National Center for Family & Parent Leadership

Schedule office hours: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/H3JKKFD>

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1 EQUITY & INTENTIONALTY

- a. Don't just check the box. Recruiting and engaging fathers is an act of equity and should be included in your strategies and foundation.
- b. Fathers' recruitment and engagement takes being intentional in the language, writing, media, and general approaches used.
- c. Fathers want their children to have opportunities they never had. Collective experience has shown that for fathers to "show up" there must be something specifically for them. While many mothers do it intrinsically, fathers may benefit from more intentional outreach.

ACTION STEP

Include fathers in developing your strategic plan. Consider holding activities specific for fathers during parent engagement (e.g., table/space for fathers, minigolf, barbershop talks, BBQ).

2 FATHER FRIENDLY ORGANIZATIONS

- a. Is there an opportunity to incorporate professional development for staff focused on engaging fathers?
- b. Staff should consider how personal experience impacts the ways fathers are engaged in programming and leadership opportunities. Organizations might ask questions such as, "Are we unconsciously reinforcing stereotypes around fathers being unengaged and uninterested in child development and early childcare systems?"

ACTION STEP

Use the Father-Friendliness Organizational Self-Assessment and Planning Tool to assess readiness:

<https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/father-friendliness-organizational-self-assessment-and-planning-tool>

3 LANGUAGE & ACCESS

- a. Be intentional about including fathers in recruitment and outreach efforts. It's often implied that parents and families don't include fathers. Use language and media that is appealing and specific to fathers.
- b. Understand barriers to father engagement:
 - I. Ask fathers and be responsive to their needs and requirements. Implement the platinum rule: treat fathers the way they want to be treated.
 - II. Work to understand and address barriers to why fathers are not engaged or showing up.

ACTION STEP

Action Step: Consider surveying fathers about their needs. Try featuring more men and fathers in media communications using resources available from the Fatherhood Media Campaign:

<https://www.fatherhood.gov/for-programs/fatherhood-media-campaign>

4 TRUSTED MESSENGERS

- a. Initiatives often have a tough time getting fathers to "show up." Organizations can work to build relationships and partner with trusted messengers to support outreach and recruitment efforts.
- b. There are many fathers and male role models in leadership positions in our communities: coaches, teachers, barbers, faith leaders, and Early/ Head Start practitioners. They are great starting places—build on their methods of communication to get information out.

ACTION STEP

Find your closest fatherhood program and build relationships with male caregivers and leaders using the National Fatherhood Initiative – Fatherhood Program Locator Tool:

<https://www.fatherhood.org/fathersource-locator>

5 FATHER CONSULTANTS & STAFF

- a. Peer-to-peer learning and recruitment work great. Fathers may be more willing to engage when they see other men and fathers engaged in leadership efforts as consultants and staff.
- b. Consider opportunities to invest in leadership development specifically for fathers. Hire fathers on staff who can help connect other fathers to the work.
- c. Add a dedicated line item that would be used in recruiting and retention of fathers.
- d. Include fathers in organizational strategies development and implementation.

ACTION STEP

If you are looking for support in this area, contact the National Center for Family and Parent Leadership. We are here to support you in your parent leadership efforts. You can [schedule office hours](#) or contact us at FPL@ecic4kids.org

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Remember that **fathers are not monolithic** and come with many different lived-experiences and cultural values. While this is a guide, fathers should be supported as individuals and not generalized.

- Consider motivation for fathers. How does the organization or initiative connect to fathers? What can fathers specifically contribute to the work, and why will it be worth their time?
- Be willing to meet fathers where they are at—step outside of the organization’s comfort zone.
- Consider using trusted messengers and multiple avenues of communication, such as text messaging, and asking moms or trusted community members to spread the word. Leverage social capital!
- To build trust, it can be helpful to acknowledge that fathers’ voices have been underrepresented in early childhood systems conversations and to share what is being done to intentionally change that.
- It is ok to engage fathers even if they’re not the primary caregiver or living with their children.
- Use strength-based recruitment strategies that celebrate involved fathers.
- Offer opportunities to connect fathers with other men and fathers.
- Display positive images of fathers and their children.
- Consider including gender-specific language by referring to “fathers” and “dads” in addition to “parents”. Research has shown that some men would be less self-conscious about attending a program for all parents rather than one specifically for fathers (Cowan et al., 2009).
- Throw out the “golden rule” and substitute it with the “platinum rule” treat father's the way they want to be treated”
- Build a specific strategy around how fathers will be engaged and have staff committed to them.



REFERENCES & RESOURCES

[Stepping Up and Speaking Out](#)

[Father-inclusive practice guide](#)

[USING RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES](#)

[GETTING AND KEEPING FATHERS INTERESTED IN YOUR PROGRAM](#)
[National Fatherhood Initiative](#)

[National Fatherhood Initiative, Fatherhood Program Locator Tool](#)

[Father Friendly Organization Self-Assessment](#)

[Recruiting and Engaging Men as Fathers in Social Work Practice](#)

[Recruitment and retention of fathers with young children in early childhood health intervention research: a systematic review and meta-analysis protocol](#)

[Recruiting and Retaining Men in Responsible Fatherhood Programs: A Research-to-Practice Brief](#)