

# The Benefits of Fatherhood Programs in Human Service Organizations



# About National Fatherhood Initiative®

Creating a world in which every child has a 24:7 Dad.<sup>SM</sup>

National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) works to increase father involvement by equipping communities and human service organizations with the father-engagement training, programs, and resources they need to be father-inclusive.

## Our Mission

NFI transforms organizations and communities by equipping them to intentionally and proactively engage fathers in their children's lives.

## Our Vision

NFI's vision is that all communities and human service organizations are proactively father-inclusive so that every child has an involved, responsible, and committed father in their lives.

To see more about our mission, our partners, our impact, and how we can help you engage fathers, please visit [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)

For fatherhood and family resources, including programs, resources, and other helpful materials, please visit [www.fathersource.org](http://www.fathersource.org).

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# What Fathers Need

## from Human Service Organizations (HSOs)

There are many challenges faced by fathers in America, and more specifically, by those who participate in responsible fatherhood programs. But what are they?

The [Fatherhood Research and Practice Network](#) (FRPN) has a brief that attempts to answer that question. (National Fatherhood Initiative® President Christopher Brown sits on the FRPN's advisory committee). Answering that question is critical because these challenges may be, as the brief notes, strongly associated with lower levels of father involvement in children's lives and lower quality co-parenting relationships.

FRPN's Dr. Jay Fagan and Rebecca Kaufman interviewed fathers from nine responsible fatherhood programs in five cities in the northeast that serve primarily low-income, unmarried, non-residential fathers about the challenges they face.

**The top five challenges the fathers mentioned in descending order of frequency were:**

- **Unemployment**
- **Lack of money to buy things for their children**
- **Inability to pay child support**
- **Difficulty keeping a job**
- **Inability to pay bills**

The other challenges they mentioned were wide-ranging, from physical health problems to their living situation preventing their children from coming to see them, to drug or alcohol use, to being accused of abusing neglecting or abusing their children.

**These challenges underscore one of the most vital pieces of guidance [National Fatherhood Initiative](#)® (NFI) has provided to human service organizations (HSOs) through the years: the importance of helping fathers meet their most immediate, pressing needs as part of or even before enrolling them in a responsible fatherhood program.** Meeting those needs is often the “hook” that encourages fathers to enroll in a responsible fatherhood program and to maintain their participation rather than learning how to be a better father and parent (e.g. through increased knowledge of child development, child discipline, etc.).

# What Fathers Need, Continued

Indeed, helping fathers overcome these challenges should be a component of a responsible fatherhood program either through the provision of services (often called "wrap-around services") by the HSO running the program or the HSO's partners.

The FRPN's findings are similar to the results of research that Mr. Brown conducted with Dr. Keith Cherry, his long-time colleague and friend, when NFI was part of the National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC-NRF), a five year project (2006-2011) funded by the Children's Bureau in the United States (US) Department of Health and Human Services through a contract with the American Humane Association. That research involved interviews with low-income, non-resident fathers involved in the child welfare system in four communities supplemented by interviews with fatherhood program practitioners who worked with these and other child-welfare involved fathers.

**Like the fathers interviewed by the FRPN researchers, the fathers Dr. Cherry and Mr. Brown interviewed also mentioned financial challenges as their most pressing needs.** Their research (published in the journal *Protecting Children*) also involved delving deeper into the impact of these fathers' challenges on the fathers and their perceptions so that child welfare workers and fatherhood practitioners within and who work with the child welfare system could better understand these fathers and, as a result, work more effectively with them and develop better strategies to encourage enrollment in fatherhood programs offered by child welfare agencies.





# What Fathers Need, Continued

The interviews identified the following themes in the lives of these fathers:

- The financial and emotional devastation caused by their own absence from their children's lives
- The belief that they are constantly extorted by the mother of their children with their children being bargaining chips in a constant tug-of-war between them and the mother in which the mother has the upper hand
- The loss of control over their lives and hopelessness about the future
- The belief that the judicial/court system fosters poor fatherhood
- This deep understanding of these fathers' lives is so critical to effective program delivery

**Staff of responsible fatherhood programs must look not only at fathers' needs but how those needs affect fathers. It is those affects that drive fathers' behavior.**

Indeed, the most successful of the programs studied during NFI's participation in the QIC-NRF were those seen by fathers to meet fathers' needs and care about fathers' welfare.

Next we will look at why evidence-based interventions are key to successful fatherhood programs.



# Parenting Interventions and HSOs

It is vital that HSOs engage fathers in parenting interventions separately from mothers. We call such interventions "fatherhood" or "fathering" programs.

A global review\* concluded that parenting interventions must do a better job of including and engaging fathers. It also concluded that evaluations of interventions should include separate analyses of the impact on fathers and mothers rather than parents in general. The team of United Kingdom and US researchers examined 199 published articles on parenting interventions that included at least some discussion of father engagement and impact. The researchers uncovered three specific problems when it comes to interventions' inclusion of fathers:

- Despite the evidence of fathers substantial impact on child development, well-being, and family functioning, parenting interventions rarely target men, or make a dedicated effort to include them
- Parenting interventions that have included men as parents or co-parents give insufficient attention to reporting on father participation and impact
- A fundamental change in the design and delivery of parenting interventions is required to overcome pervasive gender biases and to generate robust evidence on outcomes, differentiated by gender and by couple effects in evaluation

It is the final problem that is most damning. It has led to parenting interventions, focused on mothers, that will never reach their full potential to improve child well-being. There is a gender bias in parenting interventions that reflects a broader, global, damaging bias that says fathers aren't as important as mothers when it comes to child well-being. It is the most pervasive barriers to father-inclusiveness NFI has encountered.

How does NFI address this barrier? We've created evidence-based and evidence-informed programs, workshops, and other resources designed specifically for and that engage fathers.

\*<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/jcpp.12280>

# Parenting Interventions and HSOs

We've also created workshops and other resources that build the capacity of HSOs to engage fathers, such as our free [Father Friendly Check-Up™](#), and transform the culture of those organizations to value fathers as much as mothers in improving parenting behavior and, consequently, child well-being. **We've said for many years—preached, really—that because the culture, infrastructure, and staff training of most HSOs are designed to serve the needs of women and mothers that they are ill-suited for effectively engaging fathers. They create a mindset that focuses programs, services, and staff on mothers.** (See the infographic below that illustrates the challenge with this infrastructure.) As a result, organizations must examine and, as is the case in almost every instance, change their norms, the attitudes and beliefs of staff, and improve infrastructure to effectively serve all parents.

## { Our Social Issue }

**Why don't more human service organizations, programs, and services intentionally and proactively engage and serve fathers?**

We have a human service culture that focuses on the well-being of mothers and children, which creates a **lack of incentive** to engage and serve fathers.



**Lack of awareness** of the positive impact of father involvement on the well-being of children, mothers, families, and communities.



**Lack of policies** that require or encourage organizations to engage and serve fathers.



**Lack of funding** for father-specific programs and other efforts.



**Lack of programs** and other tools and resources to engage and serve fathers.



**Lack of male staff** particularly in direct-service positions/roles.



**Lack of capacity** in organizations to engage and serve fathers.



# Parenting Interventions and HSOs

Parenting interventions will never truly be parenting interventions until they are implemented within organizational cultures that **value fathers as partners in parenting who are critical to child well-being**. That's not difficult to do. It simply takes "gumption." Gumption involves courage, initiative, aggressiveness, and good old common sense.

The good news is more HSOs than ever are rolling up their sleeves to take a hard, long look at their efforts to improve parenting and child well-being. Several examples include state and local government agencies that have worked with NFI to integrate fatherhood programming among the HSOs they fund. In Texas, for example, NFI led a project that integrates father engagement in home visiting programs. We helped the state design an approach that, in turn, helped the HSOs it funds design customized approaches to engaging fathers. These approaches improved the organizations' use of evidence-based programs, such as Nurse-Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, while maintaining fidelity to the programs' models which, not surprisingly, are focused on mothers.



# Eight Issues Fatherhood Programs Help You Address

In this section, we will focus on eight societal issues (or fatherhood challenges) that father-specific programming helps HSOs address.

## 1. Child Well-Being

In 2021, 18.4 million children in America (more than 25 percent) grew up without a biological, step, or adoptive father. In some urban communities, the father absence rates were closer to 80 percent. Sadly, many of these children have limited contact with their nonresident dads. This absence leads to a number of risks to a child's health and well-being. There is a direct correlation between child well-being and improving the skills of fathers and helping them understand the importance of their role in their children's lives.

For example:

- Children from father-absent homes are two times more likely to be obese\*\*
- The poverty rate among children in father-absent homes is four times higher than among children in two-parent homes

Anything you can do to encourage fathers' involvement in their children's lives goes a long way toward child well-being.

## 2. Father Involvement

There are many reasons that a father may not be involved with his children. And unfortunately, many excellent social service programs focus mainly (or solely) on resources for mothers and children. But what about skill-building for fathers? How is your organization serving them?

From your organization's intake forms, to the attitudes and behaviors of staff, to the family programs offered, it's important to consider father-focused programs and resources in your work. Often, increased father involvement is a "means to an end" because an involved father brings many benefits to mothers and children.

So you may be wondering: What should we offer fathers? How do we start a fatherhood program and recruit them? How can we keep them coming once we get them involved?

Enter NFI's low, medium, and high intensity fatherhood skill-building resources that help you customize fatherhood programs to engage fathers in a way that is unique for your organization and setting. Learn more about our fatherhood programs and resources at [www.fathersource.org](http://www.fathersource.org).

\*\*Unless otherwise referenced, you can find the sources for data in this document in NFI's [Father Facts™ 8](#) research publication.

# Eight Issues, Continued

## 3. Child Welfare

Father absence is not one single issue. With 18+ million children going through their day without the love and support of a father, we are facing a crisis in child well-being that affects all aspects of child welfare.

For example:

- Children from father-absent homes are more likely to be abused
- Studies show that a “father hunger” appears in children within 1-3 months after a father is suddenly absent, causing the child to experience nightmares, sleeplessness, and night terrors
- A study of 3,400 middle-school students indicated that not living with both biological parents quadruples the risk of having an affective disorder

The presence of a child’s father in the home lowers the likelihood that a child will be abused. One possible reason for this connection is the very important role that fathers often play as the “protector” of their children. The facts are clear that children are safe when their father lives in their home.

For these reasons and more, it is important to provide father-focused, skill-building resources that helps fathers not only understand their role as a man, but also the importance of their involvement as a father.



# Eight Issues, Continued

## 4. Maternal and Child Health

A child's health is directly tied to their father's presence. From emotional and behavioral issues, to sexual activity and abuse and neglect, father absence affects many issues related to child health. Mothers can encourage father involvement, and in doing so, father involvement is increased.

When fathers are involved:

- The risk of infant mortality is reduced
- Babies are healthier, with fewer complications at birth, four times more likely to celebrate their first birthday, less likely to experience sudden infant death syndrome, and have improved learning and emotional development
- Children are more likely to go to well-baby visits, and have higher developmental scores and fewer behavior problems later in life

Fathers and mothers need to understand the importance of father involvement, and the benefits to their children. In fact, the importance of mothers' need in this area is why NFI created resources for mothers, to help them understand the importance of father involvement, and how to include fathers in the lives of their children for the benefit of the children.



# Eight Issues, Continued

## 5. Expectant and New Fathers and Healthcare Settings

Fatherhood resources make sense in healthcare settings (e.g. pregnancy and birthing centers and hospitals), and anywhere else you can reach expectant or new dads (e.g. home visits with pregnant and new parents). When there is a crisis pregnancy, for example, the crisis is often that the father of the baby is unable or unwilling to be involved in its life.

Science reveals that mothers don't have the market cornered when it comes to being biologically connected to their children. Nature provides a way for men to prepare for the arrival of their children and to bond with them well after birth. In her ground-breaking book *The Male Brain*\*, neuropsychologist Louann Brizedene points out that men's hormone levels change during the pregnancy of their partners. Specifically, men's levels of cortisol (the "stress hormone") increase. This change puts men's brains on "alert" for the arrival of their babies. In contrast, men's levels of testosterone (the "wandering hormone") decrease. This change lowers their competitiveness, aggression, and sex drive.

It is during this time that expectant and new fathers are most open to fatherhood skill-building and preparing for their baby. Take advantage of this opportunity to help these fathers understand the importance of their involvement right from the start.

## 6. Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Children are more likely to use and abuse drugs when they grow up without an involved, responsible, and committed father. Drugs and alcohol often serve as surrogates for children who experience a lack of love from and an emotional connection with their fathers.

Father absence creates mental health issues as well. Research reveals that within one to three months, the child of an absent father can experience nightmares, sleeplessness, and night terrors. There is a strong correlation between father absence and emotional and behavioral problems. Consider these facts:

- Children of single mothers show higher levels of aggressive behavior than children born to married mothers
- Youth without a highly involved father are more at risk of first substance use

\*View the book: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Male-Brain-Louann-Brizendine/dp/0767927540>



# Eight Issues, Continued

## 7. Poverty and Crime

There is a father factor in poverty and crime.

For example:

- Children from father-absent homes are four times more likely to be poor
- A child with an incarcerated father is seven times more likely to become incarcerated

Father absence and poverty are strongly related. Data show that it's more difficult to get fathers to provide financial support when they are not married to the mother and when they lack an emotional connection to their children.

Furthermore, the “story behind the story” of a violent crime committed in America reveals a “crime of fatherlessness.” Good fathers serve as regulators of aggressive behavior, particularly for young boys. But it's not just boys, the fastest growing prison population is young girls and women, many of whom have grown up in father-absent homes.

By engaging fathers in the lives of their children, you can help reduce poverty and crime.

## 8. Workforce Development

Many children in America have limited contact with their nonresident dads. This lack of contact leads to a host of risks to their well-being, from teen pregnancy and drug abuse, to poverty, to poor performance at school. Unfortunately, many fathers believe that if they don't have a job, then they don't have anything valuable to contribute to their children's lives. Therefore, we need to create sustained partnerships at the local level to help connect fathers to fathering skills and jobs.

Helping a father understand his importance as a father will give him the motivation he needs to get and keep a job, which will also help him feel valuable to his children and society. This feeling of importance and value is especially important for fathers who have been incarcerated.

# HSOs Having Success with Fatherhood

There are thousands of HSOs across the nation incorporating fatherhood resources and programs into their everyday efforts to serve fathers and families, and yours can, too. By partnering with NFI, there are many ways for your organization to promote responsible fatherhood. Here are some suggestions.

1. **Take NFI's Father Friendly Check-Up™:** This tool helps you assess how your organization encourages (or doesn't encourage) father involvement in the activities and programs offered by your organization. Get it free at [www.fatherhood.org/ffcu](http://www.fatherhood.org/ffcu). Consider enrolling in the Father-Friendly Organization Workshop™ in NFI's Father Engagement Academy™. This comprehensive online, on-demand workshop includes everything you need to prepare your organization to serve fathers effectively. Learn more at [academy.fatherhood.org/courses/the-father-friendly-check-up-workshop](http://academy.fatherhood.org/courses/the-father-friendly-check-up-workshop).
2. **Start small:** Add fatherhood skill-building resources such as brochures, tip cards, or pocket guides to your organization's offerings (e.g. in waiting rooms, at one-on-one sessions, at events, and in goodie bags). Visit FatherSource™, NFI's store for everything you need to serve dads, at [store.fatherhood.org/](http://store.fatherhood.org/), to get started with these affordable, effective resources.
3. **Consider offering a one-time workshop for dads or moms:** NFI's FatherTopics™ Booster Sessions help you cover important issues related to fatherhood, such as communication, domestic violence, and mothers' gatekeeping behavior. Learn more at: [store.fatherhood.org/booster-sessions](http://store.fatherhood.org/booster-sessions).
4. **Read NFI's free ebook *7 Steps to Starting a Fatherhood Program*:** Download it at [www.fatherhood.org/start-fatherhood-program-ebook](http://www.fatherhood.org/start-fatherhood-program-ebook). You will learn about:
  - **Making** the Case for a Fatherhood Program
  - **Assessing** the Father Friendliness of Your Organization
  - **Focusing** Your Efforts on the Type(s) of Fathers You Will Serve
  - **Selecting** the Right Resources and Programs
  - **Preparing** for a Sustainable Fatherhood Program
  - **Funding** Your Fatherhood Program
  - **Launching** Your Fatherhood Program and Measuring the Results
5. **If you want to create a city, county, or statewide fatherhood initiative,** NFI's Community Mobilization Approach™ (CMA) is the tool you need. Download NFI's free CMA ebook at [www.fatherhood.org/community-mobilization-ebook](http://www.fatherhood.org/community-mobilization-ebook).

In the following pages, we'll cover two HSOs that have used NFI programs. But watch out, they just might give you some ideas and inspiration for how to incorporate fatherhood into your organization's everyday efforts! Thank you in advance for all you do (and will do) in your organization to give children the involved fathers they so desperately need.

# 24:7 Dad® and “Wrap-Around” Services

Catholic Charities’ Asylum Hill Family Center has used NFI’s evidence-based [24:7 Dad®](#) group-based program to reach over 600 dads in the last 2 years.



But they don't just offer the 24:7 Dad® program—they offer other “wrap-around” services to residents, such as parenting skills, advocacy/empowerment, job training and support, homeownership training, money management/budgeting classes, and more. You see, 24:7 Dad® and wrap-around services fit well together.

**The 24:7 Dad® program is an ideal compliment to wrap-around services because the program speaks to why men do what they do.** Fatherhood can provide men with a greater context and purpose for life, and when you tap into that, you can make significant inroads in the other service areas as well. Motivating men to care more about their children is a great way to capture the heart of a man, and 24:7 Dad® does just that.

One of the fathers served by this organization was Kyle Parrish (pictured right), under age 21, in a relationship, and father to a son barely a year old. Because of an injury on the job, bills and stress mounted as Kyle waited on a worker's compensation settlement. One day, he walked into a store in the same building as the Asylum Hill Family Center and began talking with one of the center's Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood program representatives. A year later, Parrish had participated in the center's 24:7 Dad® program and wrap-around services, and said he felt like a new man.



# 24:7 Dad® and “Wrap-Around” Services

"We went from talking about my situation to him saying he might be willing to help me. But at the same time, I had to be willing to help myself," Mr. Parrish said. "I had to partake in it; otherwise [my situation] wasn't going to change."

Lois Nesci, CEO of Catholic Charities, said they started the fatherhood program because fathers were an underserved segment of the population. "As they've [fathers] developed the skills for employment, their self-confidence increases," she said.

She went on to say, "Although they were somewhat involved in the lives of their children, they recognized, and we recognized, that they needed to learn better parenting skills. Furthermore, they needed to learn ways to be more engaged with their children and their families and to develop the resources in order to become more self-sufficient. In addition to parenting skills, we also provide them with classes in financial literacy and also help them build their employment skills."

And that's great news because, according to Mr. Parrish, 24:7 Dad® helped him in his relationship with his son's mother. Specifically, to show her that he's doing something constructive to be a better father. It also helped him:

- Learn how to better interact with women, and deal with their expectations
- Understand the demands and responsibility of being a father—that it's more than just providing financially and picking up his child from school
- Learn to take care of himself and be healthy so that he could physically be there for his child

Fathers can learn all this and more through the 24:7 Dad®. In fact, NFI staff has trained HSOs from many different sectors across the country to offer the program. They include:

- Healthcare Organizations (e.g. Pregnancy Resource Centers and Hospitals)
- Recovery Centers
- Transitional Housing/Reentry Facilities
- Rescue Missions
- Workforce Development Organizations
- Head Starts / Early Head Starts
- Community Action Agencies
- Schools

# TOPS DADS



"Any man can be a father, it takes someone special to be a dad." These words have been said for years. But the Teen Outreach Pregnancy Services (TOPS) program in Arizona has taken action on this saying by offering the TOPS DAD Program as one of their teen-focused, pregnancy outreach programs. TOPS is located in Pima, Maricopa, Yavapai, and Gila counties.

TOPS' mission is to create healthy outcomes for children, their families, and the community. Their goal is to educate and empower the youth and young families in communities so they can make informed, healthy decisions. Their vision is to be available to the adolescent population and their families throughout the state. Through education and support programs on pregnancy and sexual health issues, TOPS aims to improve the health and well-being of their communities for generations to come.

TOPS maintains that a father's love is just as important as a mother's love to a child's development, and sometimes even more so. That's why they offer the TOPS DAD program, which works with teen fathers and adult fathers, teaching them to be involved in their children's lives, and to raise healthy children by instilling the "Dad Factor." The Dad Factor means that every dad has a unique and special gift he brings to raising his child. The TOPS DAD program, through peer support, one-on-one facilitation, and group sessions, gives dads the tools and confidence they need to be involved in their children's lives, and becoming the dad they want to be.





# TOPS DAD, Continued

TOPS has used the [24:7 Dad®](#) program. (Download [this free guide](#) on how to use the program with teen dads.) Dads learn everything from communication and co-parenting strategies, to tips on connecting with their child and how to discipline their child. And the offerings for dads don't stop there. Dads are also welcomed and encouraged to attend all TOPS events, including healthy pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting classes.

