Father Involvement and The Five Protective Factors



National Fatherhood Initiative®

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Introduction

Strengthening Families™ is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

It is based on engaging families, programs, and communities in building 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

Using the Strengthening Families™ framework, more than 30 states are shifting policy and practice to help programs working with children and families focus on protective factors.* States apply the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention, and other child and family serving systems.

The **Center for the Study of Social Policy** (CSSP) leads the charge in the spread of the framework across the country. CSSP acknowledges that more work needs to be done by those who use the framework to intentionally engage fathers to draw on fathers' strengths in building the factors and meet their needs.

As a consequence, National Fatherhood Initiative® collaborated with CSSP to create a brief (part of CSSP's *Making the Link* series of briefs) that maps how NFI's resources help build each of the protective factors. CSSP has distributed the brief to states and others that use the framework. (See The Appendix to read the brief.)

In this ebook, we highlight each of the protective factors and how NFI's resources can help those who use the framework to build the factors in their community through more effective engagement of fathers.

Each section includes more detail on each factor than in the brief, along with a couple of questions for you to think about after you've read the section to reflect on how that protective factor applies to the fathers and families you serve.

It is our hope that this information helps you better understand how you and your organization can engage fathers and strengthen families via the five protective factors.

*Some states add a sixth protective factor, nurturing and attachment.

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Parental Resilience

Parental resilience is defined by CSSP as "The ability to manage and bounce back from all types of challenges that emerge in every family's life. It means finding ways to solve problems, building and sustaining trusting relationships including relationships with your own child, and knowing how to seek help when necessary."

Key to building this resilience is addressing parents' individual developmental history, psychological resources, and capacity to empathize with self and others. Programs and resources that rely on Attachment Theory create the pro-social connections necessary to develop parental resilience. Because so many parents who abuse and neglect children were abused and neglected themselves, they became parents void of quality intimate relationships with their own parents or caregivers. These parents find it difficult to develop positive attachments to their own children.

Father-specific resources address this factor because fathers who abuse and neglect their children, or who are at risk to abuse and neglect, have unique developmental needs compared to mothers. They moved through a different developmental trajectory. Because many of these fathers lacked involved fathers or positive male role models, they did not develop positive attachments to their fathers and other men. They also did not develop pro-fathering attitudes and values, chief among them attitudes and values associated with healthy masculinity. Masculinity is the primary framework upon which the male psyche is constructed.

All of NFI's father-involvement programs use Attachment Theory as part of their multi-theoretical framework. Programs like **24/7 Dad®** and **InsideOut Dad®** create positive attachments between fathers, their children, and other adults (e.g. the mothers of their children) by teaching fathers how to effectively nurture themselves (e.g. through sessions on greater care of their own physical and mental health) and others (e.g. through sessions on child development and communication) in ways that fathers understand. These programs also lay the foundation for a future of healthy attachment with children when used with expectant fathers.

Moreover, because facilitators deliver these programs in a group setting, fathers create pro-social connections/attachments with caring facilitators and other fathers.** These bonds deepen as the programs progress to completion. They also learn to empathize with others through the mutual sharing of emotionally and spiritually intimate stories and experiences.

Think About It…

How resilient are the dads you serve?
How easily to they bounce back from setbacks?

**Some facilitators deliver the programs in one-on-one settings, such as home visits and office-based case management.

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Social Connections

About social connections CSSP states, "Friends, family members, neighbors and community members provide emotional support, help solve problems, offer parenting advice and give concrete assistance to parents. Networks of support are essential to parents and also offer opportunities for people to 'give back', an important part of self-esteem as well as a benefit for the community. Isolated families may need extra help in reaching out to build positive relationships."

Many of NFI's programs include sessions that build the relationship skills essential to fathers effectively connecting with others (adults and children). Father-specific programs and resources are particularly important to developing emotionally and spiritually-intimate social connections because, compared to women, most men are raised to build networks for the exchange of material goods and information. Their networks do not provide the level of emotional and spiritual support they need to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect.

NFI's programs create bonds between fathers and facilitators and among fathers through delivery in a group setting. NFI understands that these powerful connections can and should live beyond the end of father-involvement programs. We provide technical assistance and training to organizations on creating "alumni programs" in which fathers who complete a program can continue to interact formally—by participating in one or more additional programs that further build their pro-fathering skills, attitudes, and knowledge—or informally, such as by volunteering to help the host organization conduct community events and recruit other fathers into programs.

This continued engagement of fathers after a program ends further deepens fathers' social connections by keeping them engaged in a positive environment/ network, a particular challenge when working with fathers who have been socially isolated or involved in networks characterized by anti-social behavior. NFI compiled its knowledge about alumni programs into the free downloadable **Creating an Alumni Program for Graduates of a Fatherhood Program: A Guide with Tips and Advice**. It features, among other things, model alumni programs in different settings.



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Social Connections

A final, critical component of helping parents create social connections is the ability of a community to provide an environment that nurtures those connections. NFI created the **Community Mobilization Approach™** (CMA) that trains organizations and community leaders from across sectors to mobilize their communities to address father absence and increase father involvement (e.g. through broad-based and sector-specific fatherhood initiatives). NFI has implemented the CMA (or consulted on its implementation) in a diversity of communities (e.g. urban and rural). Implementation of the CMA has resulted in many long-standing fatherhood initiatives (e.g. the **Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative**, and the **Fatherhood Coalition of Tarrant County**).

NFI works alongside community leaders to implement a three-phase process that comprises the CMA. The process involves participatory research, planning, and implementation, and it produces a customized community action plan. Leaders build, implement, and own the plan, a vital outcome for successful community-wide efforts that address social challenges. This plan facilitates the development of community-wide social connections and supports for fathers.

Think About It...

- **How well connected are the dads you serve to family, friends, and community?**
- **How well connected is your fatherhood effort in the community?**



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Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

About this factor CSSP says, "Accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations for children's behavior at every age help parents see their children and youth in a positive light and promote their healthy development."

The importance of helping fathers to learn appropriate parenting skills and child development information cannot be overstated. Interventions that focus on fathers are critical because fathers are not "raised to raise children." Families and American culture in general (and many sub-cultures including those that demark immigrant enclaves in many major U.S. cities) do not adequately prepare boys and young men in the care of children. Fathers should be involved in the care of their children from the moment their children are born.

CSSP goes on to say that parenting and child development information is "most effective when it comes at the precise time parents need it to understand their own children. Parents who experienced harsh discipline or other negative childhood experiences may need extra help to change the parenting patterns they learned as children."

NFI's programs focus on building the parenting skills of fathers. One of the most important of these skills is proper discipline of children. Fathers learn, for example, the difference between punishment and discipline, to know when to discipline and when to punish, and to rely primarily on discipline. In fact, NFI's **12 Tips for Effectively Disciplining Your Children** focuses on just this topic.

Fathers also receive extensive information on child development at all stages of a child's life (i.e. at the precise time they need it based on their children's ages). One of the signature resources in NFI's programs is the Ages and Stages of Child Development Charts that informs fathers about the physical, social, and emotional milestones children should reach by specific ages. A unique feature of these charts is a list of actions fathers can take to help their children reach milestones. NFI has turned these charts into **Help Me Grow Guides** for mass distribution by organizations that fathers can use to track their children's growth and identify questions they might have for their children's pediatrician/family doctor.

Think About It…

- **Does your work with dads focus enough on developing parenting knowledge in general?**
- **Does your work with dads focus enough on helping them to learn the ages and stages of child development?**

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Concrete Support in Times of Need

About concrete support, CSSP emphasizes, "Meeting basic economic needs like food, shelter, clothing and health care is essential for families to thrive." Father-specific programs and resources are necessary to adequately address this factor because fathers, and men in general, are reluctant to seek help for their basic needs, much less to admit they have them.

CSSP points out that family poverty is the factor most strongly correlated with child abuse and neglect. Families need concrete support to prevent them from or lift them out of poverty. Research shows that father absence places children and families at greater risk of poverty. Therefore, any effort addresses this factor when that effort connects fathers with their children to prevent and intervene on father absence.

NFI recognizes, however, that meeting the basic needs of families (especially those at risk for or living in poverty) is beyond the scope of father-specific programs and resources. Therefore, NFI provides technical assistance and training to help organizations understand the basic needs faced by specific populations of fathers and the importance of integrating father-involvement efforts into the services organizations provide that help families meet their basic economic needs.

Incarcerated fathers are one of the specific populations of fathers NFI helps organizations to serve, primarily through the **InsideOut Dad®** program. These fathers often struggle with meeting their own and their families' basic economic needs before and after incarceration.

In 2010, NFI completed The Connections Project, an 18-month federally-funded initiative that involved training on InsideOut Dad® and produced several resources that build the capacity of state and local corrections systems and direct-service providers to better understand the basic needs of formerly-incarcerated fathers for successful reentry into society. Among the resources NFI produced was a free guide titled: **Engaging Fathers for Successful Reentry: Research, Tips, Best Practices**.

This guide, now available in **NFI's Free Resources** section on fatherhood.org, covers eight critical, basic needs necessary for successful reentry (e.g. housing and employment). The guide also highlights best-practice models from around the country and tips to address each of the needs.

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Concrete Support in Times of Need

CSSP goes on to say about this factor, “When families encounter a crisis such as domestic violence, mental illness or substance abuse, adequate services and supports need to be in place to provide stability, treatment and help for family members to get through the crisis.”

To that end, NFI provides crisis-focused resources including a Booster Session titled **Understanding Domestic Violence™** that organizations can use as a stand-alone offering or complement to father-involvement programs. This booster session raises awareness among fathers of the signs that they, or fathers they know, might be at risk for, or engaged in, domestic violence.

Think About It…

- **How well do you connect dads to the concrete supports that meet their unique needs?**
- **How well do you connect dads’ families to supports that meet the entire family’s needs?**



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Social and Emotional Competence of Children

About this factor CSSP says, "The social and emotional development of young children plays a critical role in their cognitive skill building, social competence, mental health, and overall wellbeing. The nature of this development is deeply affected by the quality of a child's relationships with his or her primary attachment figures, usually parents. Healthy development is threatened when families of young children face multiple problems and stressors."

Father-specific resources address the unique contribution of fathers to the social and emotional development of children. Fathers serve, for example, as a role model for boys and a relational model for girls.

CSSP goes on to point out, "Social and emotional development [is] highly dependent on the quality of a young child's primary relationships…it is increasingly common to encounter infants and young children whose attachment to a primary caregiver has been severely limited, disrupted, or arrested. These children are at risk for serious development problems…"

These facts are not lost on the thousands of practitioners that NFI has trained through the years. They include practitioners in corrections, education, military, workplace, government, and non-profit settings to name a few.

These facts are also not lost on researchers who have studied the negative impact of father absence and concluded that father involvement is critical to child well-being. NFI's programs and resources combat father absence, pure and simple. In doing so they help children develop social and emotional competence through increased and competent father involvement, thus reducing children's stressors and the risk of limited, disrupted, or arrested attachments to their primary caregivers that lead to short- and long-term developmental problems.

As a way to further address this factor, NFI has created **mother-specific resources** that address the relationships between fathers and mothers. The most significant relationship in a child's life is the relationship between his or her mother and father. This relationship is the blueprint a child follows for developing his or her own relationships. Improving this relationship is critical to prevent disruptions between children and their primary caregivers and to intervene and repair after disruptions. Because mothers are most often the primary caregiver of children—and certainly in cases where the parents are not romantically involved or living together—they need resources that help them better understand **the importance of father involvement** in the lives of their children and **how to effectively co-parent**.

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NFI's **Mom as Gateway™** booster session was NFI's first foray into this arena, and it has been extremely well received with several thousand organizations acquiring it. It helps mothers understand "maternal gatekeeping" behavior and, in doing so, become more willing to accept increased father involvement as long as it is safe for them and their children.

Because of the popularity of this booster session, NFI developed **Understanding Dad™**, a program that helps mothers address maternal gatekeeping behavior in a more comprehensive manner. The program also builds practical communication skills mothers can use to improve the relationship they have with the father of their children.

NFI has also developed resources for mothers in the form of tip cards and "pocketbook" guides for mass distribution by organizations. Learn more about these resources **here**.

Think About It…

- **Does your work with dads include addressing maternal gatekeeping behavior?**
- **Do you provide moms with resources that help them better understand and communicate with dads?**



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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY'S
strengthening families
A PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK

FATHER-INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES FROM NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE®

MAKING THE LINK

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Strengthening Families™ is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is based on engaging families, programs and communities in building 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

Using the Strengthening Families framework, more than 30 states are shifting policy and practice to help programs working with children and families focus on protective factors. States apply the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention and other child and family serving systems.

For more information, visit www.strengtheningfamilies.net.

WHY STRENGTHENING FAMILIES EFFORTS SHOULD INCORPORATE FATHER INVOLVEMENT

The parent and family characteristics identified in the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework are critical for all parents and caregivers. All parents need support for the protective factors in their lives, and children benefit when *all* of the important adults in their lives have the support they need.

Unfortunately, many parent engagement efforts do not effectively engage and support fathers, particularly in early childhood. Even programs and providers that recognize the importance of fathers in their children's lives often fail to reach out specifically to fathers, or to create environments where fathers feel they have a role. Intentional efforts are necessary to make fathers feel welcome and valued in the settings that serve young children, so that they can also receive support to build their protective factors, strengthen their relationships with their children and be the best fathers they can be.

Strengthening Families implementation teams at the program, community and state levels can take steps to recognize the strengths and needs of fathers and support father involvement. Some strategies that programs can be encouraged to use include:

- Employing men as staff members in varied positions and in significant roles
- Creating an environment that is welcoming and inclusive of all family members
- Consistently communicating with both fathers and mothers on all issues concerning their children – and making this policy explicit to both parents
- Hosting special activities and programs in response to men's expressed interests
- Intentionally inviting and encouraging men to become active participants in the program

Representatives of local and state fatherhood initiatives can be engaged as partners on Strengthening Families leadership teams to ensure that the needs of fathers are considered in Strengthening Families implementation planning. Materials and resources from National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) can support those efforts at all levels. For example, NFI's *Community Mobilization Approach™* trains organizations and community leaders to mobilize their communities to address father absence and increase father involvement through broad-based and sector-specific fatherhood initiatives.

A 2016 white paper from NFI, *Mapping Father-Involvement Programs and Resources to the Protective Factors* (http://www.fatherhood.org/hubfs/Father-Involvement-Protective-Factors-Whitepaper-070716.pdf), describes how these resources support fathers in developing each of the Strengthening Families protective factors. These points are summarized on the next page.

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strengthening families
A PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK

MAKING THE LINK

FATHER-INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES FROM NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE®

ABOUT NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE®

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) is the nation's leading non-profit working to end father absence. Founded in 1994, NFI's mission is to transform organizations and communities by equipping them to intentionally and proactively engage fathers in their children's lives.

NFI is the nation's #1 trainer of practitioners and organizations on the use of evidence-based and evidence-informed fatherhood programs and resources. Since 2002, NFI has trained more than 25,000 practitioners representing more than 6,500 organizations. NFI's programs and resources are used in every state, in U.S. territories, and in many other countries.

For more information, visit www.fatherhood.org and www.fathersource.org.

National Fatherhood Initiative®

HOW RESOURCES FROM NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE® SUPPORT FATHERS TO BUILD THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Parental Resilience: NFI programs support fathers to build their resilience by addressing their individual developmental histories and capacity to empathize with self and others. Fathers who lacked involved fathers or positive male role models in their own childhood may need support to develop positive attachments to their children and other adults (e.g. the mothers of their children); pro-fathering attitudes and values; and healthy masculinity. Using Attachment Theory as part of their multi-theoretical framework, programs like *24/7 Dad®* and *InsideOut Dad®* teach fathers how to effectively nurture themselves (e.g. through sessions on greater care of their own physical and mental health) and others (e.g. through sessions on child development and communication).

Social Connections: Many of NFI's programs include sessions that build the relationship skills for fathers to effectively connect with others (including other fathers, the mothers of their children and their own extended family) in support of healthy child development and well-being. Father-specific programs and resources are particularly important to help men form social networks that will provide the emotional and spiritual support they need to be the best fathers they can be. NFI's programs create bonds among fathers and facilitators through delivery in a group setting. NFI also supports organizations to create "alumni programs" so that these powerful connections can live beyond the end of father-involvement programs.

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development: Interventions that focus on fathers are critical, particularly for men who were not "raised to raise children" but want to fulfill their important role in their children's lives. Families and American culture in general do not adequately prepare boys and young men in the care of children. NFI's programs focus on building the parenting skills of fathers, as well as providing information on child development at all stages of a child's life.

Concrete Support in Times of Need: Many men are reluctant to seek help for their basic needs, making it important to address this protective factor in father-specific programming. NFI provides technical assistance and training to help organizations understand the basic needs faced by specific populations of fathers and the importance of integrating father-involvement efforts into services that help families meet their basic economic needs.

Social and Emotional Competence of Children: NFI's resources address the unique contribution of fathers to the social and emotional development of children. By combating father absence, father-involvement efforts help children develop social and emotional competence by reducing children's stressors and the risk of limited, disrupted or arrested attachments to their primary caregivers.

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