

Mapping Father-Involvement Programs and Resources to the Protective Factors White Paper

Introduction

In recent years national, state, and local efforts to prevent child abuse and maltreatment (CAN) have increasingly been organized around “The Protective Factors Framework” (PFF).¹ This framework underlies broad-based efforts (e.g. national and statewide initiatives) and serves as the foundation for direct-service programs within community-based organizations that seek to reduce and prevent child abuse and neglect.

According to the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), there are five (5) factors that protect children from CAN: 1) parental resilience, 2) social connections, 3) knowledge of parenting and child development, 4) concrete support in times of need, and 5) social and emotional competence of children. Research conducted by CSSP and others has found that prevention and intervention programs that build and maintain these factors in families reduce the risk of CAN.² Recent research conducted on behalf of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that “parenting competencies” are critical to building protective factors for some of the most at-risk populations of youth (thus increasing their social and emotional well-being), including youth exposed to domestic and community violence, youth in or transitioning out of foster care, and youth who are victims of child abuse and neglect. CSSP also found that teen parents’ social and emotional well-being is increased when teen parents are more competent parents.³

At the same time as the use of the PFF has grown, an increasing number of national, state, and local efforts have been launched to increase the involvement of fathers in the lives of children. Research has shown that the absence of an involved, responsible, committed father in the lives of children places those children at greater risk for a host of ills, including poverty, poor performance in school, alcohol and drug abuse, and violent behavior. It also places them at greater risk for CAN.⁴ Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to how these two efforts complement each other.

Consequently, PFF-based initiatives and programs have included father-specific programs and resources only at the margins if at all. This paper addresses why PFF-based efforts should integrate father-involvement (and specific) programs and resources. It “maps” (i.e. links) how efforts to increase father involvement in the lives of children build the protective factors through prevention and intervention, thus helping to break the intergenerational nature of CAN. Examples of NFI’s father-specific programs and resources illustrate the map.

¹ PFF is sometimes referred to as “The Protective Factors Framework” or “The Strengthening Families Approach.” We use the
² Center for the Study of Social Policy (2008). *Protective Factors: Literature Review: Early Care and Education Programs and the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*.
³ Center for the Study of Social Policy (2013).
⁴ National Fatherhood Initiative (2016). *Father Facts Seventh Edition*.

Protective Factor #1: 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, when they were children, 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.⁵ 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 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.

Protective Factor #2: 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/mothers, most men/fathers are

⁵ In addition to Attachment Theory, NFI’s multi-theoretical framework includes Social Learning Theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and the Transtheoretical Model (also known as Stages of Change).

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 CAN.

As noted earlier, 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.⁶

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*.⁷ It features, among other things, model alumni programs in different settings.

A 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).

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.

Protective Factor #3: 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.

⁶ One of the many advantages of using NFI's programs is the ability to "string them together."

⁷ Visit www.fatherhood.org/freeresources to download a copy.

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.

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.⁸ NFI has turned these charts into brochure-like guides for mass distribution by organizations and created an online, interactive version of the charts called *Countdown to Growing Up™: A Growth and Development Tracker* that fathers can use to track their children’s growth and identify questions they might have for their children’s pediatrician/family doctor.⁹

Protective Factor #4: 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 CAN. 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 during that project is *Engaging Fathers for Successful Reentry: Research, Tips, Best Practices*, a free guide that covers eight critical basic needs

⁸ NFI contracted with a M.D. to develop these charts and works with a M.D. to periodically review and update them.

⁹ To use the tracker, visit www.fatherhood.org/countdowntogrowingup.

necessary for successful reentry (e.g. housing and employment).¹⁰ The guide highlights best-practice models from around the country and tips that address each of the needs.

Another example of NFI's work that supports this factor is the creation of *24/7 Dad®: New York City Edition*, a customized version of *24/7 Dad®*. The City of New York's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) contracted with NFI to customize the curriculum to address the most important basic needs that, in combination with the other basic-needs services of the city (e.g. housing, employment, and education), comprehensively addressed the needs of the non-residential, non-custodial fathers served by direct-service providers contracted by DYCD to serve this specific population. This curriculum addresses such needs as child support, access and visitation, and financial (e.g. budget) management.

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." NFI provides crisis-focused resources like the *Understanding Domestic Violence™* booster session 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.

Protective Factor #5: 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

¹⁰ You can download this resource at <http://www.fatherhood.org/free-resources-main>.

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.

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.

Conclusion

There is a clear need to integrate father-involvement programs and resources with efforts to reduce child abuse and maltreatment through application of The Protective Factors Framework (PFF). PFF-based interventions and programs will benefit from complementary efforts that speak to the unique needs and characteristics of fathers. NFI's programs and resources in particular are well suited to this integration because of the breadth of programs and resources NFI offers. Organizations can integrate NFI's offerings into PFF-based interventions and programs in a number of ways that consider organizations' budgets and readiness to integrate father-involvement programs and resources. NFI stands ready to provide training, technical assistance, and consultation because we understand the PFF and how to integrate father-involvement programs and resources that support each of the factors separately and the entire framework.