

# CREATING A CULTURE OF ACTIVE FATHER ENGAGEMENT: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR HEAD START PROGRAMS

## AUTHORS

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Baltimore City  
**Head Start**

Mayor's Office of Children & Family Success





Dear Reader,

Thank you for your commitment to supporting families and young children through your work with Head Start. This resource was created especially for you—as a leader, staff member, or advocate—who believes in the power of inclusive, intentional, and family-centered practices.

At the heart of the Head Start mission is the understanding that strong partnerships with families are essential to children’s learning and well-being. [The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement \(PFCE\) Framework](#) reminds us that this work is a shared responsibility of program leadership, staff, and families that is rooted in culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

Father figures play a critical role in this vision. Yet, creating spaces where they feel welcomed, valued, and actively engaged requires more than good intentions—it requires thoughtful planning, sustained commitment, and strategic action.

This guide is designed to support your journey toward building and sustaining a father-friendly program culture. Grounded in best practices and enriched by insights from a three-year partnership between Baltimore City Head Start, the Center for Urban Families, and researchers at MEF Associates, this guide offers practical steps, reflective questions, real-world examples, and helpful resources.

Whether you are just beginning this work or looking to deepen your efforts, we hope you find inspiration, guidance, and encouragement in the pages ahead.

With appreciation for all that you do,

The Authors

# INTRODUCTION

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This resource is designed to guide Head Start programs in building and sustaining a father-friendly culture—one that actively includes, supports, and values father figures as key partners in children’s development.

This document incorporates best practices, research, and lessons learned from a three-year partnership (2022-2024) between Baltimore City Head Start, the Center for Urban Families, and a team of researchers at MEF Associates. This partnership provided an opportunity to test various strategies in a real-world setting. It also allowed us to solicit feedback from staff who implemented these strategies and from father figures who participated in these activities.

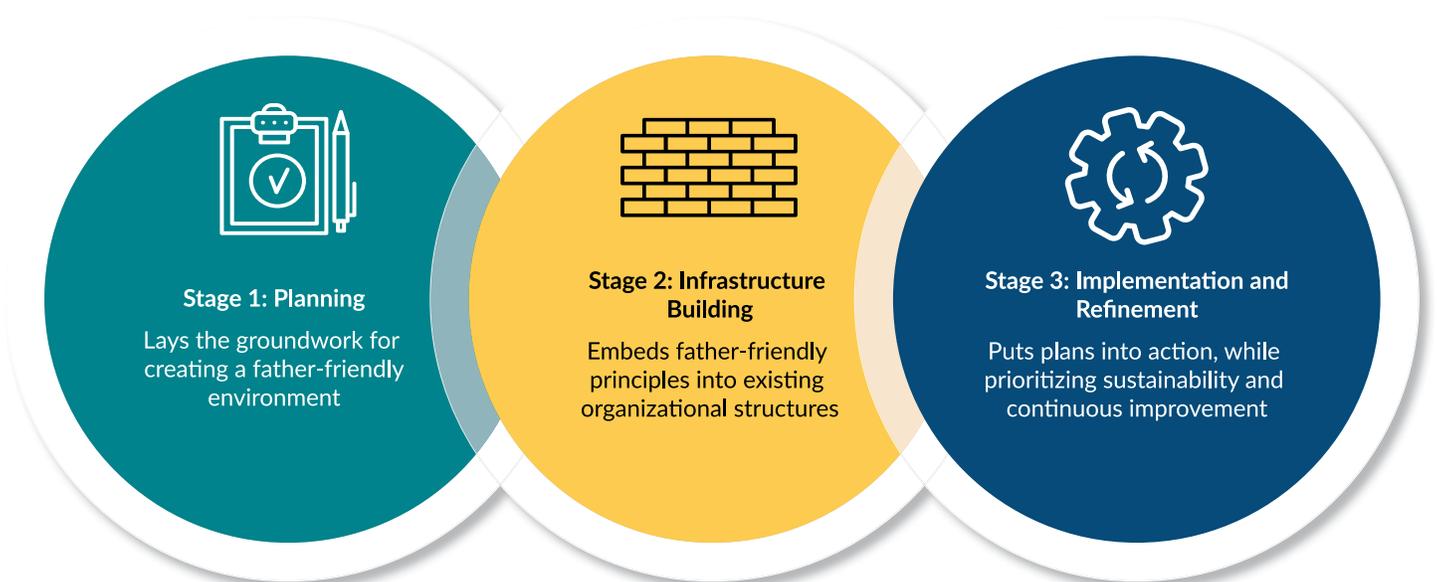
This guide is organized into three key stages of culture change:

- 1. Planning** – Establishing a vision, defining shared goals, and defining staff roles and responsibilities to ensure future success.
- 2. Infrastructure Building** – Embedding father-friendly principles into existing policies, organizational structures, and systems to support long-term sustainability and culture change.
- 3. Implementation and Refinement** – Putting plans into action, evaluating efforts, and making continuous improvement to continue the momentum.

Each stage includes:

- **Action steps** that programs may take to make their program culture more father-friendly,
- **Discussion questions** to consider when implementing action steps,
- **Case study examples** illustrating how action steps were implemented at Baltimore City Head Start, and
- **Resources** to support implementation and further exploration.

## EXHIBIT 1. KEY STAGES FOR CREATING FATHER FRIENDLY CULTURE



# FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN BALTIMORE CITY HEAD START

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Baltimore—nicknamed “Charm City”— is known for its many tight-knit neighborhoods, rich cultural history, and family-friendly attractions like the Inner Harbor and National Aquarium. It’s also a city shaped by deep racial diversity, with the majority (about 61 percent) of residents identifying as Black or African American.<sup>1</sup>

Institutions like Johns Hopkins, Morgan State University, and other local universities help drive education and research, while the city’s port connects it to major trade routes.

At the same time, many fathers in Baltimore face real barriers—like unstable employment, low wages, and higher incarceration rates compared to the national average. Black families tend to be disproportionately affected by these circumstances compared to other racial groups in the city.<sup>2</sup>

These challenges can make it hard for fathers to stay actively involved in their children’s lives. However, research has shown that many fathers in Baltimore are eager to support their children and families.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>

Take John, for example:

One morning, the Father Engagement Coordinator invited dads to join their children in making paper airplanes. John hesitated at first, unsure of what to expect. He leaned in and whispered to the Father Engagement Coordinator, “I don’t know how to make a paper airplane.”

The Father Engagement Coordinator responded with excitement, “That’s great! Now you and your daughter will have the opportunity to share and learn how to make them together.”

He proceeded to teach John each step, and John eagerly followed up by sharing and instructing his daughter with every new

step he learned. John’s a quick study and learned how to make three different styles of airplanes. As he and his daughter laughed, experimented with designs, and competed to see whose plane could fly the farthest, something shifted.

Together, they watched their creations soar. That simple activity sparked trust and confidence, opening the door to deeper involvement with both his daughter and the program.

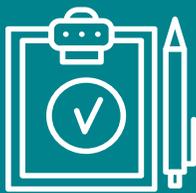
Afterwards, John chuckled and said, “I think I needed that more than she did.”

In 2022, a planning grant from the Ballmer Group helped launch a partnership between Baltimore City Head Start, the Center for Urban Families, and MEF Associates. Through this partnership, the team tested different strategies for father engagement, reflected on what worked well (and what did not), and created this guide to share insights with other Head Start programs.

As you explore this resource, remember that father engagement is not one-size-fits-all. As of 2023, Baltimore City Head Start operates 10 sites serving over 750 children and their families—most of whom are Black and live in English-speaking households.<sup>6</sup> This local Baltimore context shaped the practical examples and recommendations in this guide. However, just like in Baltimore, your local community’s strengths, challenges, and culture should guide your approach.



Look for this icon throughout the document to learn more about how Baltimore City Head Start implemented action steps to create a father-friendly program—and what we learned through this process.



# STAGE 1: PLANNING

*Stage 1 lays the groundwork for creating a father-friendly environment. The goals of this stage are to establish a vision, define shared goals, and clarify staff roles and responsibilities to ensure future success.*

## ACTION STEPS FOR PLANNING

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### 1. Assess the readiness of your program.

Begin by assessing whether your program is ready to invest in father-friendly culture change. You may find it helpful to consider:

- Prior attempts to shift program culture and what lessons learned apply to this work.
- Ways to gauge staff attitudes, values, and beliefs about father engagement.
- Opportunities to engage leadership—as well as teachers, Family Service Workers, and other staff who interact with families.
- What resources are available to support your program in this endeavor—such as financial resources, staff time, community partnerships.
- What data can inform your decisions—such as data from the Program Information Report (PIR), community needs assessment, or family surveys.

- The extent to which Head Start leadership—such as the Head Start Board of Directors and Policy Council—know about, prioritize, and support this work.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is our program doing well to support father figures? What areas need improvement? How can we build on what's working, and how can we address the gaps? Where's the best place to begin?
- What beliefs or attitudes (positive or negative) do we hold about father figures? How might these affect our success? How can we address these negative beliefs and attitudes?
- Have we tried to improve father engagement before? What worked well? What did not? What can we do differently this time?
- What people, tools, or community resources can help us make our program more welcoming to fathers?



## 2. Identify a dedicated leader to coordinate father engagement initiatives.

Choose a staff member to lead your father engagement work. This person may already be part of your team, or you may decide to hire someone new. Either way, it's important to select someone who understands the community your program serves. Ideally, this leader should have lived experience or a strong connection to the cultures and backgrounds of the families in your program. Consider identifying someone who is also a father for the role, given that father figures may be more willing to engage with other fathers. This helps build trust and ensures engagement strategies are culturally responsive and relevant.

The Father Engagement Coordinator may take on responsibilities such as:

- Organizing father engagement activities
- Facilitating professional development for staff
- Monitoring implementation of father engagement strategies
- Tracking father engagement
- Supporting leadership in communicating the overall vision for father engagement
- Overseeing a Fatherhood Advisory Committee
- Coordinating with community partners to support fathers

Because funding is often limited, programs should have a general understanding of the resources needed to create and sustain this role. Consider whether the position will be full-time or part-time. Some programs may find it more

feasible to integrate these responsibilities into an existing role, such as a Family Engagement Coordinator, rather than creating a new, stand-alone position. Regardless of the staffing model you choose, it's important that the person in this role has clear responsibilities, adequate time, and the training needed to be effective.

Finally, it is important to note that father engagement cannot be the responsibility of one person. Successful culture change requires shared ownership with all staff—including Head Start leadership, Family Service Workers, teachers, and other members of the Head Start community. This can be accomplished by integrating father engagement into all job descriptions, offering professional development to all staff, and integrating father engagement strategies into everyday interactions and activities.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Who can lead a father-friendly culture change? How might different leadership styles and strategies help or hinder your goals?
- What types of skills, training, and technical assistance does this Father Engagement Coordinator need?
- How can we support this leader? Are the expectations and responsibilities for this role clear? Are the expectations and responsibilities feasible?



## THE IMPACT OF A FATHER ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR

Baltimore City Head Start hired a Father Engagement Coordinator to support its 10 sites by organizing father engagement activities, engaging male volunteers, and supporting outreach to fathers. During our interviews with Family Service Workers, they described the benefits of this role, noting that it helps with:

### **Bridging gaps and providing engagement opportunities.**

*"[The Father Engagement Coordinator] is a great contribution. He has a lot of know-how and energy, he's engaging. No matter the age group he meets the dad where they are. That role is significant because it bridges the gaps with what CFUF offers families."*

### **Building rapport with fathers and encouraging participation.**

*"It's wonderful, they get to interact with another male. [The Father Engagement Coordinator] contacts the dads. The dads ask about him. He's responsive to dads."*

*"[The Father Engagement Coordinator] posts the photos to encourage other fathers to participate in the program. A father came in and asked when the next activity was because he saw the photo board. They show interest."*

### **Providing additional resources and supports.**

*"[The Father Engagement Coordinator] shares information, good information. I've heard him share information about the Center for Urban Families and the expungement clinic."*

### **Alleviating Family Service Workers workload**

*"I think the role itself is a great idea because [Family Service Workers] have a lot on our plate. Having someone to focus on male involvement and contact, build rapport with dads."*

### **3. Create a Fatherhood Advisory Committee.**

Advisory groups play an important role in guiding various Head Start initiatives. For example, a School Readiness Committee might inform curriculum decisions. Similarly, a Fatherhood Advisory Committee can support the design and rollout of father engagement initiatives throughout the school year.

The structure of a Fatherhood Advisory Committee can be informed by other existing

committees, such as the Head Start Policy Council. The Father Engagement Coordinator can help organize and support the committee. The committee should include father figures who have children enrolled in the program.

While there is tremendous value in establishing a Father Advisory Council, it can be difficult for many Head Start programs given capacity and resource constraints. If this is the case for your program, consider inviting father figures to join existing committees such as the Head Start Policy Council or Family Involvement Council.



Using this approach can also be effective for engaging fathers and using their feedback to strengthen and expand family engagement efforts.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which option works best for your program—creating a Fatherhood Advisory Committee or inviting father figures to join existing committees?
- What does participation look like? How often should the committee meet? Should the committee meet in-person or virtually? What roles and responsibilities can its members have?
- How can we recruit and retain fathers? How might we encourage participation? How can we compensate fathers for their time? How can we maintain momentum year after year?
- How do we ensure the feedback from the Fatherhood Advisory Committee is integrated into our program planning and implementation?



## BUILDING A FATHER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Creating a Fatherhood Advisory Committee was a central goal for Baltimore City Head Start as they set out to create a father-friendly culture. The committee would intentionally focus on father engagement and be responsible for informing the content and rollout of different initiatives. However, creating the Fatherhood Advisory Committee proved to be challenging. For example:

- **Scheduling:** Interested fathers had limited availability due to their work schedules and family responsibilities. This made it difficult to find a consistent meeting time that worked for the same group of men.
- **Buy-in:** At first, the committee was described to fathers as a group that discusses policies and procedures—which did not sound exciting or relevant to them. However, the Father Engagement Coordinator shared hope that more fathers may want to join if they better understood how their input could shape real decisions. He commented, “It doesn’t sound like fun or interesting work—we’re talking about policy. Once they realize they have a voice it could be some interesting work.”
- **Relationship building:** Personal relationships are key to recruiting fathers, but relationship-building takes time. One staff member noted, “You have to get dads that you have relationships with, and that’s not easy.” This slow progress highlights that building strong connections with fathers needs to be a shared, long-term effort across all Head Start centers in Baltimore City.

### 4. Develop father engagement goals.

Work with the Fatherhood Advisory Committee to identify shared goals for advancing a father-friendly environment within your program.

Consider goals that are specific to your program’s needs. For example, goals may focus on increasing the number of fathers who engage, improving the quality of father engagement activities, or other areas. Also,

consider reviewing father engagement standards in the yearly self-assessments. Integrating the father engagement goals you establish into the self-assessment will be an important way to track progress and opportunities to improve. These goals can help inform policy and program decisions in the infrastructure building stage (Stage 2).

Once you develop shared goals, consider ways to communicate these goals to all staff. You can do this through staff meetings, professional development activities, emails, and other existing communication channels.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What story does program data currently tell us about father engagement? Is there a need to improve data entry or data quality related to father engagement indicators?
- What do we hope to accomplish with father engagement, short and long-term? What types of support and resources do we need? Are the goals measurable?
- What lessons can be learned from other attempts to shift program culture about father engagement? What has been successful? What has been challenging?

## 5. Communicate early and often about father engagement.

Formally introduce the father engagement team to the school community. This team may include a Father Engagement Coordinator and Fatherhood Advisory Committee members. The information can be communicated with a newsletter, at a parent meeting, during open house, or any other relevant events.

Be sure to explain who is on the father engagement team and why father involvement matters. Additionally, describe the goals and guiding principles for the father engagement team. Sharing this early on helps families and staff understand that father engagement is a priority. It also shows that your program values teamwork and inclusion.

When talking with families, make sure to welcome fathers and father figures. Use language that invites them to participate—including the translation of written materials into the families' primary language. Including images of fathers is another way to make sure they know they are welcome. Keep in mind that families look different—include and welcome all caring male figures, like uncles, grandfathers, or stepdads. Use Google image search to find images that represent the fathers your program serves. Many are free or inexpensive to license for use on flyers, newsletters, and social media posts.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How can we incorporate language and images into our communication materials that are authentic and welcoming to fathers and father figures?
- How can we make sure families and staff receive information about the father engagement team? What types of communication are most effective (e.g., meetings, newsletters, social media posts, in-person discussion)?
- Are there any potential challenges or barriers we should anticipate in communicating our program's prioritization of father engagement?



## INTRODUCING FAMILIES TO THE FATHER ENGAGEMENT TEAM

Introducing families to the father engagement team is essential for building relationships and ensuring sustained engagement. Recognizing this, the Father Engagement Coordinator at Baltimore City Head Start developed materials (like the flyer below) to introduce families to the father engagement team and invite fathers to connect with the team. Adding a personal touch to the flyer—such as photographs—can help fathers easily identify staff and foster relationship building.





## FATHER ENGAGEMENT MESSAGING

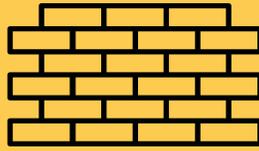
During the three-year partnership with Baltimore City Head Start, we found many marketing efforts were unintentionally geared toward mothers—even though the goal was to engage all caregivers. One Family Service Worker pointed out that advertisements often use the word “parents”, which can lead mothers to assume they are the ones expected to respond. They suggested using the word “families” instead, which may help signal that fathers and other caregivers are welcome and expected to participate.

Mothers also noticed this pattern. Some said that school communication often seems to be directed mainly at moms. They suggested that speaking directly to fathers in messages from the program could make a big difference. For example, saying **“We need you to be part of these services”** instead of **“We want you to join”** may help fathers feel essential and valued.

This small shift in language can send a powerful message: Fathers are not optional, but rather a vital part of their child’s learning and development. Using more direct and inclusive language can help make fathers feel like true partners in their children’s education.

## RESOURCES FOR PLANNING

- The National Fatherhood Initiative created a [Father Friendly checklist](#) to support programs with assessing the structure of their program and whether it has the foundation to create and sustain successful programs.
- The U.S Department of Health and Human Services created the [“Engaging Fathers” video and supplemental resources](#) to guide early childhood leaders when making strategic decisions about how to include fathers in their programming.
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network published [A Guide to Forming Advisory Boards](#) to support professionals in anticipating key decision-making opportunities throughout the process of creating a strong advisory board.
- The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse created a [Tip Card for Fatherhood Practitioners: Recruitment](#) to support programs and agencies in facilitating group activities with fathers.



## STAGE 2: INFRASTRUCTURE BUILDING

*Stage 2 focuses on embedding father-friendly principles into existing policies, organizational structures, and systems. The goals of this stage are to establish processes and norms that can support long-term sustainability and culture change for the program.*

### ACTION STEPS FOR INFRASTRUCTURE BUILDING

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#### **1. Revise policies and procedures to explicitly mention fathers and emphasize their importance.**

Review your family engagement policies and procedures. Check if they mention father figures clearly and explicitly—or where this may be missing.

Create a clear and inclusive definition of “father”. This should include biological fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, and other father figures involved in a child’s life.

Work with your Fatherhood Advisory Committee (see Stage 1) to ensure the definition reflects the real-life makeup of families in your program. Then, use this updated language in all materials and communications to show that your program welcomes and values all father figures.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- What types of families do we serve? What types of inclusive language should we use to promote inclusivity?

- How can we actively involve fathers in transforming our policies and procedures? How can we ensure policies reflect the strengths and needs of our families?
- What existing systems and programs can be enhanced to better include fathers? What are some best practices for engaging fathers that we can incorporate into policies?
- How can we create a system for regularly reviewing and revising our family engagement procedures with an explicit focus on fathers?

#### **2. Revise procedures for how information is collected and shared with fathers.**

Mothers or female caregivers may be more likely to enroll their children, setting them up to become the primary point of contact in the Head Start case management systems. As a result, fathers may miss out on direct communications about the program or their children’s learning. It is important to make sure that fathers have

accounts set up in communication platforms like ClassDojo to ensure they are receiving information first-hand.

To address this, consider ways to standardize procedures for collecting basic contact information about father figures. Identify opportunities to collect information about father figures during home visits, open houses, pick-up and drop-off times, or through your family needs assessment.

Take time to explore whether fathers prefer different forms of communication—whether that be email, text, phone calls, social media, or classroom platforms like ClassDojo.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What opportunities, beyond enrollment and home visits, can we create to collect fathers' contact information? What support do staff need to collect information with fathers?
- What are the most effective communication platforms for sharing information with fathers? How can we gather feedback from fathers about their communication preferences and needs?
- How can we improve the documentation of fathers' contact information in our administrative records? How can we evaluate the effectiveness of our strategies in engaging fathers and improving communication?



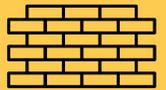
## THE IMPACT OF A FATHER ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR

ClassDojo is a promising tool for communicating virtually with fathers. Many staff identified ClassDojo as an effective way to communicate with families, especially since it is already used in other Baltimore school systems. Because caregivers are often familiar with the platform from these other school settings, it can help make communication more consistent and easier to manage.

However, staff and families noted that fathers often don't use ClassDojo unless mothers encourage them to. To increase father engagement, staff may need to take extra steps to get fathers on board—such as inviting them directly to sign up and explaining how the tool helps them stay involved in their child's learning.

Fathers shared that direct engagement from staff helps them feel welcome. Take Ralph, for example:

*Ralph and his ex-wife, Sandy, share custody of their daughter, Melissa. While staff used ClassDojo to share updates about Melissa's day and upcoming father-child activities, Ralph initially relied on Sandy to pass along this information because he didn't have his own ClassDojo account. Unfortunately, Ralph often received this information at the last minute, which prevented him from attending activities. After expressing his concerns to staff, Ralph was given his own account. He now receives timely information and participates more actively in his daughter's school life.*



### 3. Integrate father-friendly principles into existing professional development opportunities.

Instead of adding extra training, look for ways to include father-friendly principles in the professional development staff already do. This makes it easier to bring new team members up to speed and helps keep father engagement a consistent focus, even when staff changes happen.

Since most early childhood staff are women, it's important to reflect on any beliefs or assumptions that might affect how father figures are viewed. Talk openly as a team about attitudes toward fathers, and provide support where needed. Some staff may benefit from training on how to better engage fathers or work through challenging situations.

Tailor training to fit different roles:

- **Family Service Workers** may need ideas for how to connect with fathers and hold respectful, productive conversations.
- **Teachers** might benefit from strategies for involving fathers in classroom activities and their child's learning.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

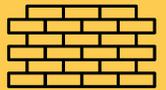
- What type of professional development is needed for staff to engage fathers effectively and comfortably? How can we align professional development with father-friendly policy revisions?
- What topics resonate most with staff? What topics are staff less interested in? How can we incorporate staff voices in organizational culture change?

- What beliefs and attitudes do staff have about father figures that could help or hinder success? How can we engage staff at all levels and in different roles to assess and talk about this?



#### Father-friendly professional development topics might include:

- The benefits of father involvement on children's development and academic success.
- How to have difficult conversations with mothers about father involvement.
- Supporting fathers who have specific needs.
- How to communicate effectively with fathers and maintain professional boundaries.
- Techniques for building rapport and trust with fathers.



## LEVERAGING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Baltimore City Head Start collaborates with their community partner—the Center for Urban Families—to host an annual event focused on father engagement. The event, now held at the start of each school year, is designed to set expectations and provide support in implementing father-friendly strategies.

The event includes activities with Family Service Workers to contextualize the importance of father engagement on children’s social and emotional development, particularly within the context of African American fathers in Baltimore. These sessions create a space for reflection—allowing staff to draw on their personal experiences and plan for the future.

During this three-year partnership, the Center for Urban Families also led professional development workshops with staff to focus on father engagement. During these workshops, Family Service Workers used a checklist to identify opportunities for creating father-friendly environments. They also created action plans for implementing these changes.

For example, some staff recognized the need to provide fathers with resources, leading the Center for Urban Families to organize a resource fair to connect staff with community-based organizations that offer job training, expungement services, health screenings, and more.

## RESOURCES FOR INFRASTRUCTURE BUILDING

- The National Home Visiting Resource Center published their blog—[Families Served, Fathers, Home Visiting Voice Q&A: Jennifer Wilder on Engaging Connecticut Fathers in Home Visiting](#)—detailing Connecticut’s strides to incorporate more inclusivity in their home visiting practices for fathers.
- The Florida Department of Education’s resource, [Beyond the Day: Engaging Fathers in Education All Year](#), lists opportunities to engage fathers and father figures at school, home, and in the community.
- The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement created the [Birth to 5 Father Engagement Programming Guide](#). This guide outlines Head Start program strategies for providing access and continuity of services to fathers.
- The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse developed the [Running A Program: Communications](#) tipsheet with best practices for sharing program information with fathers.



# STAGE 3: IMPLEMENTATION AND REFINEMENT

*Stage 3 involves implementing activities and strategies developed during Stages 1 and 2. Stage 3 also aims to foster continuous improvement and support sustainability. The action steps listed in this section provide a sample of ideas but are by no means exhaustive. It is important to remember that scaling each activity or strategy is contingent on program structure, ensuring adjustments are feasible and sustainable.*

## ACTION STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND REFINEMENT

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### 1. Identify ways to transform the center's physical space.

Create a space that shows father figures are valued. A father-friendly environment helps all families feel welcome and included. This could involve—

- Displaying photos of father figures in shared spaces.
- Using language on signs and posters that welcomes fathers—being sure to use inclusive language that welcomes father figures like uncles, grandfathers, and stepdads.
- Setting up a bulletin board where families can post pictures.
- Adding a communication board where fathers can share messages and see upcoming events.
- Installing changing tables in the men's restroom.

Invite fathers to help with this process. Ask them what would make the space feel more inviting and use their feedback to guide your updates.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

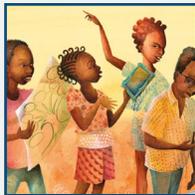
- Where do we currently post photographs? Do these photographs represent the diversity of our families? Do they include father figures? If not, what steps need to be taken in order to change this?
- What physical spaces need to be updated to better support fathers (e.g., changing tables in the men's restrooms)? How can the Fatherhood Advisory Committee inform these changes to physical spaces?



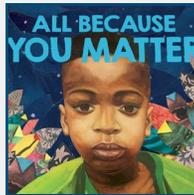
## THE IMPACT OF A FATHER ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR

Throughout the project, Baltimore City Head Start staff shared successful strategies for creating more inclusive spaces that normalize father involvement. For example:

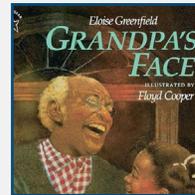
- Some sites were intentional about displaying pictures of fathers on the walls
- Other sites created a bulletin board focusing on fathers and their children
- Some teachers stocked their classrooms with books that included fathers, such as:



*Going Down Home with Daddy* by Kelly Starling Lyons & Daniel Minter



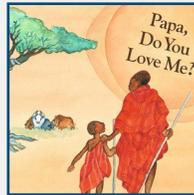
*All Because You Matter* by Tami Charles & Bryan Collier



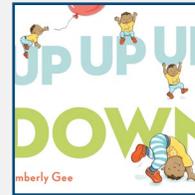
*Grandpa's Face* by Eloise Greenfield & Floyd Cooper



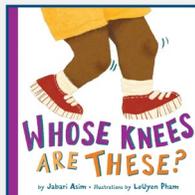
*Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* by Mo Willems



*Papa, Do You Love Me?* by Barbara M. Jooisse & Barbara Lavallee



*Up, Up, Down Down* by Kimberly Gee



*Whose Knees are These* by Jabari Asim & LeUyen Pham



*Hair Twins* by Raakehee Mirchandani & Holly Hatam



## 2. Intentionally engage fathers in relevant activities.

Consider ways to work with the Fatherhood Advisory Committee and Father Engagement Coordinator to identify activities that are relevant and engaging for fathers. A simple survey and informal conversations with fathers can help identify relevant activities and fathers' availability. Some example activities include ones that center around fathers' children, sporting events, cookouts, or parenting workshops.

Fathers may face a variety of barriers that make it harder to engage—mental health challenges, financial instability, or work obligations. Consider ways to support fathers in such circumstances. For example, consider whether fathers might benefit from father-focused parenting groups or educational workshops on topics such as financial management, healthy relationships, parenting, mental health, or nutrition.

If your program does not have the capacity to provide these services and resources, consider community partnerships that could help expand fathers' access to comprehensive services.

Targeted and individual outreach inviting fathers to participate in events may also help promote engagement. When inviting fathers to participate in any event or activity, consider ways to emphasize the benefits of participation—such as learning a new skill, spending time with their child(ren), or meeting other fathers. Whenever possible, offer incentives for participation—such as meals or childcare during events.

Finally, it is important to consider how father engagement activities can unintentionally exclude children who do not have active father figures in their lives. When planning events, think creatively about how to invite a broad range of father figures, such as uncles, older brothers, godfathers, or family friends. Working closely with your Fatherhood Advisory Committee can also help you navigate these complexities thoughtfully and respectfully.



### RELYING ON FAMILY SERVICE COORDINATORS

Strong working relationships with your Family Service Coordinators are critical for hosting successful father-child activities. Family Service Coordinators can help reiterate that school activities are a welcome space for both fathers and father figures. They can also connect with father figures to ensure they are receiving pertinent resources.

At Baltimore City Head Start, a powerful example of this took place when three generations of men attended a school event together. The father, feeling welcomed and supported by the Family Service Coordinators, invited his own father to join. The grandfather was excited to see where his grandson attended school and expressed enthusiasm about participating in future activities.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How can we recognize and celebrate fathers? What preplanned, hands-on events do we currently have scheduled that could be more inclusive to fathers? What efforts can be made to increase fathers' attendance at these events?
- Are there specific days and times that work better for most fathers than others (i.e., during drop-off or pick-up)? Do we have the capacity to host activities outside of traditional work hours to accommodate fathers? How can we incentivize/maximize participation?
- What community partners can we leverage to support these efforts? How can community partnerships increase the capacity to offer more resources and activities to fathers?



## FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

During the three-year partnership with Baltimore City Head Start we learned a great deal about fathers' preferences for family engagement activities. We often heard that fathers engage more when activities are "fun", "hands-on", and centered around sports or other "healthy competition". Most fathers said they prefer in-person activities, especially smaller engagements during pick-up and drop-off, with the added incentive of food. Examples include:

- **Breakfast for fathers at the start of the school year.** Over breakfast, fathers learn about other available services and ways to get involved. After breakfast, fathers are invited to participate in activities with their child. Baltimore City Head Start uses this event to launch a series of father-focused activities or workshops. Staff told us this event often "packs the room".
- **An annual basketball competition for fathers.** This event was noted as a huge success. During this event, staff would set up tables to share information about available resources. Staff noted this event helped fathers feel more comfortable and open to participating in future events.

### 3. Hire more male staff by recruiting from current Head Start fathers.

Hiring more male staff at Head Start centers is a vital step toward creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. Male role models can significantly impact children's development, especially for male students who benefit from

representation. Additionally, having more males on staff can help fathers feel represented and increase their likelihood of participation.

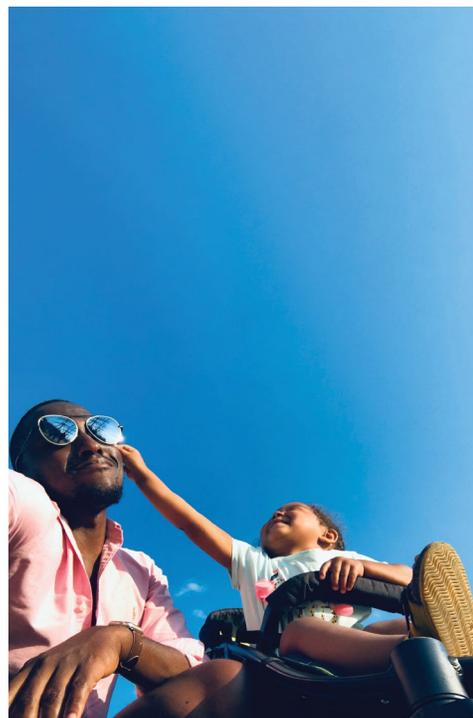
When new positions open, consider the strengths and availability of current Head Start fathers. Keep fathers informed about these hiring opportunities through various forms of



communication—for example, by announcing them at a Policy Council meeting. To expand the candidate pool, recruitment strategies should target male-focused organizations and seek partnerships with local fatherhood initiatives.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What barriers, if any, prevent, males from applying to a role at our Head Start program? What additional resources or support might they need to apply?
- How can we better assess and identify the strengths of fathers who may be suitable candidates for open positions?
- How can we communicate with fathers about open positions? How can we make job opportunities more appealing to fathers?



## THE IMPACT OF MALE REPRESENTATION

Baltimore City Head Start employees are nearly all females, a pattern that mirrors trends in Head Start programs across the country. Throughout our partnership, many staff and caregivers were enthusiastic about increasing the “male presence” in Baltimore City Head Start centers.

In general, Family Service Workers had positive reflections on how male staff have helped improve father engagement. One male Family Service Worker shared his experiences, saying:

*“I think my presence as the only male figure has impacted fathers’ participation. We have some of them come in to volunteer. The culture has improved. Getting fathers involved has improved in the program...”*

Another female Family Service Worker reflected on changes she witnessed while working alongside this male staff member, saying:

*“I see the fathers’ reaction to him. They’ll walk past me, but listen to him. Representation is really important. It makes them feel like they have a safe space. Most of the fathers feel more comfortable talking to him.”*



## RECRUITING FATHERS FOR EMPLOYMENT

Baltimore City Head Start created a flyer (see below) to recruit fathers who may be interested in working at their child's Head Start center. The flyers also helped alert father to other opportunities—such as the Fatherhood Advisory Committee.

**CFUF** CENTER FOR URBAN FAMILIES  
HELPING FATHERS AND FAMILIES WORK

# DADS CAN WORK AT HEADSTART!

**JOB OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDE:**

- Education Coordinator
- Lead Teacher
- Assistant Teacher
- Family Services Coordinator
- Head Start Classroom Lead Teacher
- Assistant Cook / Nutrition Services
- Custodian

For more information contact:  
Vernon Wallace  
vwallace@CFUF.org

**[BACKGROUND CHECK IS REQUIRED]**



#### 4. Gather and share feedback from staff and fathers to continue improving.

Consider opportunities to gather and share ongoing feedback from a variety of staff and families. For example, consider creating regular check-ins with staff to monitor progress towards culture change and proactively solve challenges as they may arise. When doing this, provide opportunities for staff at different levels and in different positions to reflect on what father engagement means in the context of their specific role.

Similarly, consider how fathers can offer feedback. You can rely on your Fatherhood Advisory Committee to provide this type of feedback. This committee may also be helpful in gathering feedback from other fathers. This ongoing dialogue can help identify areas for improvement and ensure engagement efforts are effective and meaningful.

Keep in mind that different cultures may have different expectations or traditions around how fathers engage with their children and their education. Creating space to understand and

respect these differences can help your program be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all families.

Finally, make sure to close the feedback loop by sharing what you've learned with staff. When staff hear directly how their efforts are making a difference—or where changes are needed—it helps create a stronger, more responsive program for everyone.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What existing feedback opportunities can we modify to ask about father engagement? How can we make sure that both staff and fathers feel comfortable and supported in sharing feedback and experiences?
- What are some potential barriers to effective feedback collection from fathers and staff? How can we address these barriers?
- What are the best methods for sharing feedback from fathers to staff to ensure it is received and understood? How can we ensure feedback is constructive and leads to meaningful action and improvements?

## RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND REFINEMENT

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- Ages and Stages Questionnaires wrote the [Improve Your Program with Parent Feedback](#) brief outlining effective strategies to collect and use survey data collected from parents.
- The Head Start: Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center produced the [Using RBCs in Head Start Programs](#) short video to introduce early childhood education leadership to relationship-based competencies for staff working directly with families.



## SURVEYING FATHERS AND FATHER FIGURES

A simple survey like the one below can help programs understand fathers' preferences for engagement and communication, setting programs up for success.

### 1. This year, how well has Head Start done with the following?

*Not well at all, Somewhat well, Very well*

- Letting you know (on a regular basis) how your child is doing in the program
- Helping you understand what children at your child's age are like
- Making you aware of chances to volunteer at the program
- Providing workshops, materials, or information about how to help your child learn at home
- Providing information on community services to help your child or your family

### 2. How would you prefer to receive information from Head Start? Choose your top 3.

- The mother of my child relays information
- Messages through ClassDojo
- Texts
- Email
- Directly from staff at pick-up and drop-off
- Other fathers who have children at Head Start
- I do not want to receive information about Head Start
- Other (please specify)

### 3. How often have Head Start staff done the following things this year?

*Never (0 times), rarely (every couple of months), sometimes (about once a month), or very often (weekly or more), N/A*

- Suggested activities for you and your child to do together
- Answered your questions when they came up
- Taken your values and culture into account when serving you
- Introduced you to other fathers
- Invited you to volunteer in your child's classroom
- Invited you to special events or field trips
- Invited you to parent education meetings or workshops
- Invited you to parent-teacher conferences
- Invited you to participate in Policy Council or Parent Committees
- Encouraged you to participate in community building activities
- Visited you in your home
- Shared newsletters, fliers, or Head Start materials



#### 4. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

- Head Start is a welcoming place for fathers
- Head Start staff respect fathers
- Head Start support and encourage fathers
- Head Start has helped me any my family
- I feel comfortable talking to my child's teacher about their progress
- I feel comfortable talking to my Family Service Coordinator about personal family issues
- I feel my Family Support Coordinator hears and understands me

#### 5. What is your relationship to the child who attends Head Start? If you have multiple children attending Head Start, please choose all that apply.

- Biological father
- Adoptive father
- Stepfather
- Grandfather
- Great grandfather
- Brother/stepbrother
- Other relative or in-law
- Foster parent
- Other non-relative
- Parent's partner
- Other (please specify)

Is there anything else you would like Head Start to know about issues/barriers that impact your participation?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). 2023 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates Detailed Table B01001.

<sup>2</sup> Colston, A., Darity, W., Sandy, García, R. E., Duke University, Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University, Russell, L., & Zumaeta, J. (2021b). The color of wealth in Baltimore. In *A Publication of the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University*. [https://socialequity.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/50080\\_The-Color-of-Wealth-in-Baltimore-Report\\_10.5.21.pdf](https://socialequity.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/50080_The-Color-of-Wealth-in-Baltimore-Report_10.5.21.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Baltimore Healthy Start, "2019/2020 Annual Report." Baltimore Healthy Start, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, K. A., Arrington Sanders, R., Grace, K. T., Thorpe, R. J., Doro, E., & Bowleg, L. (2021). "Having a child meant I had a real life": Reproductive coercion and childbearing motivations among young Black men living in Baltimore. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 36(17-18), NP9197-NP9225.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, T. K., Tandon, S. D., Bair-Merritt, M. H., & Hanson, J. L. (2015). Parenting needs of urban, African American fathers. *American journal of men's health*, 9(4), 317-331.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, B., Brooks, D., & Burroughs-Campbell, S. (2023). *Annual Report 2022-2023 Baltimore City Head Start*.



Baltimore City  
**Head Start**

Mayor's Office of Children & Family Success

