



ENGAGING FATHERS:

Tools and Tips to Assess the Father-Friendliness of Your Organization¹

and develop action
plans to address any
shortcomings.



Healthy father involvement is associated with better outcomes on nearly every measure of child wellbeing² and research clearly suggests that overall family outcomes improve when fathers participate in child and family interventions.³ However, many social service organizations still struggle to engage effectively with fathers. Does your organization work with children and families but find it hard to involve fathers in program services?

¹ This NRFC Spotlight draws on information and research findings presented in "Organizational Father Friendliness Assessments" (Vann, N. & Perry, A.), a chapter in *Social Work Practice with Fathers: Engagement, Assessment, and Intervention* (Bellamy, J. et al., eds., 2022 forthcoming).

² Child and Family Research Partnership. (2021)

³ Bellamy, J. (2020)

Negative attitudes of staff toward fathers may be grounded in previous negative or apathetic experiences with fathers they encountered or from experiences with their own fathers or other men in their personal lives.

WHAT DOES A FATHER-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATION LOOK LIKE?

- Programs and services are developed with fathers in mind.
- Fathers are valued and seen as assets with the capacity to make positive contributions to their family's functioning.
- The organizational culture is warm and welcoming so that fathers see it as a space where they can learn and grow.
- Staff receive training to increase their understanding of the important roles that fathers play, and they are comfortable in engaging and serving fathers.
- The commitment to engaging and serving fathers permeates through every facet of the organization.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Research has shown that programs designed to provide support for families with young children are more likely to engage fathers and produce positive outcomes when they:

- Start with the expectation that fathers will participate in program services.
- Allow time to design and implement father-specific services.
- Use teaching methods and content that include hands-on learning and are respectful of fathers' cultural backgrounds.
- Employ staff who have the ability to connect with fathers.
- Provide staff training that covers father engagement strategies and ongoing encouragement to put learning into practice.
- Develop partnerships with community service providers to augment available services and address basic needs of fathers.
- Use program data to monitor program benchmarks, incorporate fathers' perspectives, and inform refinements to service delivery.

ASSESSING THE FATHER-FRIENDLINESS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION

To assess the father-friendliness of an organization, you need input from a variety of stakeholders who will work together as an assessment team. Depending on the specific assessment tool used, the team will assess and respond to a series of questions in various categories. The goal is to identify operational areas that need improvement and then develop action plans to increase the father-friendliness of the organization.

The assessment team should include:

- At **least** one decision maker in the organization.
- Staff representing a variety of job positions (e.g., receptionist, direct service providers, and managers).
- Parents (fathers and mothers) who have participated in programs or services provided by the organization.
 - If fathers have not yet participated in services, you could ask a few fathers from the community to share their perspective.
 - You could also invite board members or community partners to provide input.

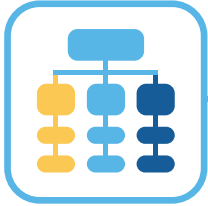
COMMON ASSESSMENT CATEGORIES AND SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Examples of general categories and questions that have been used in father-friendliness assessments:



1. Organizational location and physical environment

- Do fathers view the organization as a place they can come for assistance?
- Does the physical environment feel safe and inviting to fathers?
- Do images and language in brochures or posters include positive images of fathers and children?



2. Organizational Support

- Does the organization have a mission statement that recognizes the importance of father involvement and clearly mentions support services for fathers?
- Do the organization's budget, staffing, and training priorities reflect a commitment to serving fathers?
- Are board members and organization decision makers committed to providing services for fathers?



3. Policies and Procedures

- Do intake forms ask for information about both parents? Do they ensure that staff have contact information for mothers and fathers?
- Do agency policies include ways to assess situations where one parent may not want the other involved? Does the agency help parents resolve differences, while keeping the best interests of the child in mind?
- Can program hours be adjusted to accommodate the time constraints of working fathers?



4. Staffing and Staff Training

- Are staff aware of the research on the importance of father involvement in the lives of children?
- Do staff have the skills to engage with fathers and earn their confidence and respect?
- Are all staff trained to recognize unconscious biases that may have an impact on their work?
- Are all staff trained in best practices for father engagement?



5. Program Services

- Are fathers given opportunities to help design and provide feedback on program services for fathers?
- Are services delivered at times that are convenient for fathers? Are virtual options available?
- Do group sessions include activities and materials that appeal to fathers?



6. Communication

- Are written communications addressed to both parents and sent separately if the parents do not live together?
- Do staff interact with fathers in a manner that demonstrates respect and empathy?
- Do all forms of communication with parents (e.g., phone calls, marketing materials, brochures, websites, and social media) convey positive messages to fathers and emphasize the importance of both parents' involvement?



7. Community Engagement

- Do community members and program providers view the organization as a good resource for fathers?
- Are services available through community partners if fathers need help with issues such as child support, coparenting, employment, legal matters, mental health, or substance misuse?



DEVELOPING ACTION STEPS

Once the team has completed its assessment, it is time to develop short- and long-term plans to address areas that need improvement. Begin by setting manageable goals that can be implemented in the first two to six months.

Here are a few examples of **short-term action steps** that organizations have developed based on their father-friendliness assessment:

- Make sure posters and brochures feature pictures of fathers and/or include the word “father.”
- Ensure that all forms of communication with families address both parents.
- Reach out to fathers in the community (individually or through focus groups) and ask what kind of services might be helpful for them.
- Identify other community organizations that can provide support services for fathers.
- Plan and implement programming designed for fathers and invite their feedback.
- Provide staff training that:
 - Emphasizes the importance of father involvement.
 - Covers situational barriers that fathers may face.
 - Includes an opportunity for each staff member to reflect on their relationship with their own father, and the impact of this and other life experiences on their personal and professional attitudes and behaviors.

FOUR POPULAR FATHER-FRIENDLINESS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

1

Father-Friendliness Organizational Self-Assessment and Planning Tool

- Developed in 1999 by Pamela Wilson and Nigel Vann for the National Head Start Association and the National Partnership for Community Leadership, this tool was updated in 2000 based on feedback from early users. It is still available for free download via the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse at <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/father-friendliness-organizational-self-assessment-and-planning-tool>

2

Father Friendly Check-Up (FFCU)

- The FFCU was developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) in 2000 and has since been evaluated and updated through various iterations. It was most recently updated in 2020 and is available online from NFI, along with the option of follow-up assistance, at <https://www.fatherhood.org/ffcu>

3

Assessment Guide on Father Inclusive Practices (FIP)

- The FIP was developed by Neil Tift for the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families in 2000. Abbreviated and full versions are now available, with training, through Paternal Instincts, Inc. (480-334-3022).

4

The Dakota Father Friendly Assessment (DFF)

- The DFF was developed and tested in 2011 by Joseph White, Sean E. Brotherson, Adam Galovan, Erin Holmes, and Jennifer Kampmann. Copies of the questionnaire and more information are available from Joseph White ([Foundation for Family Life](#), 801-750-5398) or Sean Brotherson (North Dakota State University, Sean.Brotherson@ndsu.edu).

FOR FURTHER READING

Bellamy, J. (2020). [Engaging fathers in home visiting programs](#). National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

- Drawing on observations from the Dads Matter Home Visiting intervention, Bellamy debunks several misconceptions about fathers and outlines four key principles to guide the engagement of fathers in home visiting services.

Child and Family Research Partnership, University of Texas at Austin. (2021). [Fatherhood Resource Hub](#).

- Includes resources to [Make your Organization Father-Friendly](#) and a one-page handout, [Tips to Create a Father-Friendly Organization](#).

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2021). [Birth to five father engagement programming guide](#).

- Includes sections on “Creating Father-Friendly Environments in Early Childhood Programs” and “Strategies to Build Partnerships with Fathers.”