

# FATHER INVOLVEMENT TOOLKIT

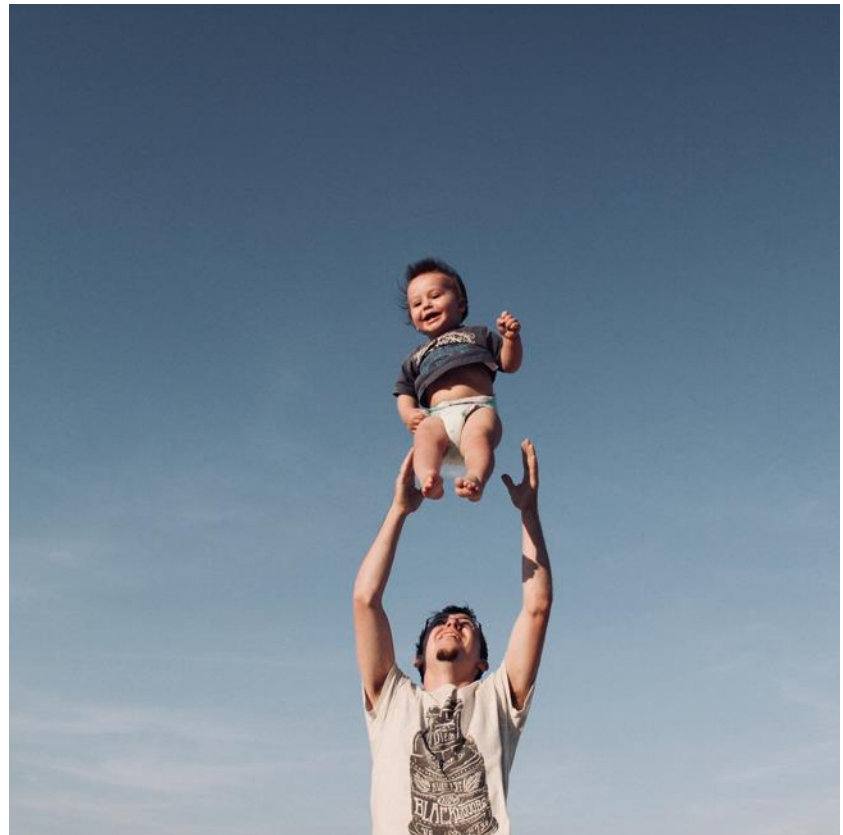
## *Engagement Plan*

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### Overview

The Florida Association of Healthy Start Coalitions through its MIECHV Initiative is committed to improve access to services for fathers in its home visiting programs. One of the first and initial steps in doing so requires assessing current efforts and operations at all levels. These efforts will be explored through both Inclusion and Engagement Plans.

This second plan is designed to offer effective ways for engaging him. The plan will explore five key steps to engagement by presenting practical approaches and helpful ideas to improve services and outcomes for fathers.



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- Step 1 – Understanding Engagement
- Step 2 – Recognize Barriers and Challenges
- Step 3 – Tips Towards Engagement
- Step 4 – Practical Ideas and Activities
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## Step 1 – Understanding Engagement

The first step of the Engagement Plan is to understand what is meant by engagement. During pregnancy, father engagement is directed towards the mother and requires active participation in prenatal activities (e.g. reading prenatal care books and asking questions at prenatal care visits). The father avails himself to the mother by being physically present, the expectation for him to also be an active participant or actively engaged in the prenatal process becomes his role and continues as the child grows. (Alio et al. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 2013). Research shows that paternal engagement promotes healthy pregnancy behaviors, thereby decreasing the likelihood of an adverse pregnancy outcome. In numerous studies, women with absent fathers have a higher prevalence of maternal obstetric complications, are less likely to get adequate prenatal care, and more likely to smoke. It is possible that financial and emotional support decreases stress and promotes healthy behaviors, thereby improving the infant's survival. (Martin, L. T., McNamara, M. J., Milot, A. S., Halle, T., & Hair, E. C. (2007). *The effects of father involvement during pregnancy on receipt of prenatal care and maternal smoking*. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 11(6), 595–602).

In infancy, engagement is the direct interaction of the father with the child, playing with him, reading books to the child etc. resulting in enhanced child development. A father's engagement both in infancy and early years has shown to have a positive impact on a child's emotional and psychological state, educational development, and



school readiness, as well as increased ability to socialize and build good relationships. (Yeung, W. J., Duncan, G. J., & Hill, M. S. (2000). Putting fathers back in the picture: Parental activities and children's adult outcomes. M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of fathers in child development* (3rd ed., pp. 49-65, 318-325). New York, NY., Pruett, K. (2000). *Father-need*. New York, NY: Broadway Books; Sternberg, K. J. (1997)) In contrast, research has shown that the lack of father engagement can have long-term negative effects on children. They are more likely to be poor, have a greater risk of being involved in dangerous or unhealthy behaviors influenced by peers, and have an increased risk of developmental delays. (*America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well Being, 2001.*; McLanahan SS, Arstone AM, Marks NF., *The Role of Mother-Only Families in Reproducing Poverty*. *Children in Poverty: Child Development and Public Policy*. Ed. Aleth C, Huston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.) The engagement of fathers in the lives of children is essential to not only their getting off to a healthy start, but their early and adolescence years into adulthood.



## Step 2 – Recognize Barriers and Challenges



The second step of the Engagement Plan is to recognize and address as many barriers that a father may face towards engagement. One barrier he may face is with the service provider. It is imperative that the service provider starts with an attitude of including him in home visiting and program services. S/he must be aware of any biases they may have towards engaging the father in services.

The service provider must also be aware of any inherent barriers in the program's guidelines and practices. These can include: types of questions being asked, the unintended exclusion of him during the visit (*privacy of the questions that may be asked of her and not allow his presence*), limitations of materials, tools and benefits that either omits or excludes the father, not being willing to schedule visitations around his schedule which may be due to him working, and flexibility in the meeting location (*he is not allowed or no longer welcomed or feel comfortable in the home of the mother of the baby*).

Each of the barriers above must be acknowledged and addressed to maximize his engagement. We know from the research that the earlier the engagement the better the outcomes for both the mother and child. Consequently, better outcomes for mother and baby means better outcomes in service delivery and program performance.

Another barrier he may face is the mother of the baby:

- Her attitude (why does he have to be involved, I don't want him to be a part, etc.)
- Her mother, her mother's mother and other family members attitude (*same as bullet above*)
- Her living arrangement (certain housing may not allow the father to be present, or either of them being in a new relationship creates tension)

Other barriers to his engagement can come from partners and other service providers such as:

- Doctor's office (not welcoming and/or acknowledging his presence during visits)
- Governmental agencies (vital records, child support, custody/family court, HUD, TANF, etc.)
- Hospital (birthing floor, delivery room, etc.)
- Work, jobs (paternity leave, work schedules, etc.)



## Step 3 – Tips Towards Engagement

The third step in the Engagement Plan addresses how best to engage him. The key to this step is being intentional about Getting to Know Him. This is paramount to the level of engagement that will be accomplished by both individual providers and the program as a whole. Although getting to know him can prove to be a BIG challenge, here are some helpful tips to consider:

1

**Learn the top 5 things that are important to fathers.** In identifying these things, be sure to consider the culture of the men you serve, the place where they live, the activities they engage in, the types of jobs and income they have, the level of education, services and resources that are readily available to him. Although you may not have time to do in-depth research for each cultural item mentioned, partner with those who have the information and learn from them. At the very least, look at the factual information you have learned over the years in working with the mothers.



2

**Work to discover his interests, likes, and needs.** This is done first by attempting to ask him directly. If being direct does not work, you may want to use motivational interviewing techniques to gain insight. Beyond questions, pay attention to how he presents himself, what he wears, what he drives, where he works, things he talks about, and where he hangs out, etc. Finally, you can gather additional information from her, but it may require very active listening to filter out “tainted/bias” information and corroborate it with non-verbal communication (observation) looking for an entry point to ask his feedback, help, or expertise to get at his interest, like, or even need. Note: A disclosure of past or present intimate partner violence with the father should always be taken seriously. Discuss these cases with your supervisor prior to moving forward.

3

**Seek to understand his goal(s) for the future of himself, his family (if they are together and plan to be together), and his/their child.** Knowing this information will be essential in helping to get an idea of how much engagement can be expected from him. When he has positive goals and aspirations for himself, the child and their family, more engagement can be expected. Having him more engaged leads to more teaching, training and sharing of resources and opportunities both to the mother and father. When there is an absence of goals, but a desire to establish goals, that is also beneficial for effective engagement. If there is no goal or interest in setting goal(s), engagement will more likely be a challenge and a different plan of engagement will be required.



## Step 4 – Practical Ideas and Activities

The fourth step of the Engagement Plan addresses engaging him through practical ideas and relevant activities. These things can draw him to the services and/or program resources that increase his engagement. When he is engaged, providers can help to increase his knowledge about his role as a father and the value he brings to the health of the mother, the child and the family. Here are some practical ideas and activities towards engagement:



1

Share resources that are easy to access that support the 5 top things that are important to fathers/men/him in your area, including:

- job assistance programs,
- free or reduced legal services to help address and present, past, or pending legal issues, warrants, or arrests,
- assistance with driver's licenses and/or official identification,
- assistance in child support matters,
- financial literacy information,
- transportation assistance,
- education,
- training and certification programs,
- men's health, men support groups, and/or places that serve men, etc.

(These resources must be easy to navigate, welcoming, and have a good reputation in the community.)



2

**Create activities and/or events that address his interests based on what you have learned.** It is always important to include input from fathers you presently serve. In addition to inviting and welcoming his ideas, find ways to have him involved in planning and carrying out those activities and events. Often the activities and events should be competitive, challenging, and peak his interest, while pushing him to achieve a higher level of accomplishment. For example, a sporting event like a 3-on-3 basketball tournament, a triathlon type event, video game tournament, card games, bike race, etc. all with a prize that is important to the winning team. An underlining goal in engaging him is to draw others toward building a network of fathers for future activities and events.

3

### **Help him to build a Life Plan Tool Box for his present and future goal(s).**

This tool box should include:

- a. His personal goal(s) that address: job/employment, school, and financial. Help him to identify at least one thing in each of the three categories and/or any other category he may identify that is important to him. These goals should follow the SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, results oriented, time-sensitive) method that are within reach.
- b. Family / Relationship goal(s) should be established to clarify his role and hopes as a father. It should make clear how he plans to interact and support the mother of the child, the child and those family members for which he will interact. Relationship and role clarification is extremely important in addressing expectations, what needs to be done and a plan for having a healthy environment for the child and family. Key elements should include: effective communication, parenting, relationship building, family planning, extended family dynamics, budgeting, time management, visitation, scheduling, activities, roles, etc.
- c. Child goal(s) for what he wants to see up to and beyond birth. The goal(s) can include things he want to achieve in preparation of the birth (*reading, clothing, caring, duties assigned, etc.*), at birth (*delivery room participants, cutting the cord, handing over the baby to the mother, etc.*), after birth (*taking home, day and night coverage, roles, follow-up doctors' appointments*) and beyond (*activities, caring, sharing, modeling, character, traditions, etc.*)
- d. Full Life Plan that incorporates bullets "a-c" above and completes the life course (*elementary, pre-teen, adolescence and back to pre-conception for future child(ren)*). Having a full plan helps the father have a direction that is meaningful and purposeful for everyone involved.



4

**Provide engagement and leadership opportunities for him in the Program to recruit and help other fathers.** The outcome of engaging him successfully should result in him being a part of services and activities to other fathers. This could include:

- a. Inviting him to be an advocate for the program and services. Having him promote services, the program, and activities through his network and social media outlets;
- b. Having him trained to teach and/or co-teach classes, workshops, and trainings both to other service providers, fathers, and families;
- c. Having him come up with activities, events, and ideas for reaching and meeting the needs of other fathers; and/or
- d. Including him in strategic planning sessions and other relevant planning meetings aimed at program and process improvements.



## Step 5 - Evaluation

The final step in the Engagement Plan is a built-in process improvement. The evaluation is useful in providing helpful information to providers and programs for engaging fathers. Evaluation must be an integral part of the Engagement Plan providing regular feedback by monitoring and reviewing what is occurring versus what should be occurring. Effective program evaluation is a systematic way to improve and account for actions by involving procedures that are useful, feasible, ethical, and accurate. It does not need to be extensive, but should be sufficient enough to determine if improvements have been made.

The evaluation is intended to answer the following questions:

- What will we be measuring in our existing services and program?
- How do we plan to measure and what specific tool(s) will we use in measuring?
- Why does it matter what we are measuring both services and the program?
- Who will evaluate and to whom will the results be communicated?

The results of the evaluation can be useful to inform and advise leadership on program and process improvements. The evaluation process must include steps for communicating findings to specific audiences and applying findings for program improvement. Those findings should be shared with others to continue to build the knowledge base about what “works” and what changes to programs that must be incorporated ultimately to inform program decisionmaking.

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