



DEVELOPING A RESEARCH AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK AROUND WHOLE FAMILY, FATHER ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Much has changed about how we understand fathers' roles in families in the last half century. We now know that fathers play important roles in children's [social and psychological development](#). Several studies show that children with involved, nurturing fathers have higher IQs and better linguistic and cognitive capacities. Toddlers with involved, nurturing fathers start school with higher levels of academic and behavioral readiness. These effects extend into young adulthood when adolescents whose fathers are actively engaged in parenting experience better verbal skills, intellectual functioning, and academic achievement.

From birth, children with involved fathers are [more likely to experience](#) emotional security and confidence when exploring their surroundings and healthier social relationships with peers into the school-aged years.

We also know that 21st century fathers [experience](#) a variety of relationship arrangements, genders, and sexual orientations; can be externally employed or stay-at-home, adoptive or stepparents; and are more than capable caregivers to their children.

While the body of research around fathers and their roles has grown over the years, for decision-makers at all levels, inconsistent, incomplete, or otherwise insufficient data hampers their ability to champion continued, deepened investment in fathers for whole family prosperity.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will require leaders to apply a heightened standard to policy, programmatic, and budgetary decisions in light of exacerbated resource constraints.

Today, more than ever, decision-makers expect an abundance of information on program and policy outcomes and the return on investment that they produce to inform their approaches and fiscal allocations. Competition for limited resources along with advances in technology, easier access to data, and more accurate and reliable tools of measurement have ushered in this shift.

Incentives for federally funded initiatives to target proven interventions play a role as well. [The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative](#) found a 48 percent increase in the number of states assessing the costs and benefits of

programs and policy options between 2008 and 2011, and 29 states reported using versions of cost-benefit analyses to inform policy decisions during that time.

Evidence is essential, but so is equitable application of standards and guidelines. While evidence-based approaches require that efforts be validated by documented scientific evidence and inquiry, [evidence-informed approaches](#) modify that standard to include efforts that use the best available research and practice knowledge to guide decision-making. This orientation is more responsive to contextual factors, including families and organizations' cultural contexts, community values, and individual preferences.

So, as leaders respond to a myriad of crises brought on, exacerbated by, or happening in parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic — which is disproportionality impacting BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities — we have an opportunity to develop a research and evaluation framework around whole family, father engagement and support to equip stakeholders with the information necessary to maximize the impact of policies and programs for children and families.

Opportunities to do so include:

- Capturing information on all caregivers within a family unit — regardless of residential status — in state-administered programs and services
- Including economic analyses of supporting fathers in evaluations
- Ensuring racial and gender equity lenses are applied to data capture, evaluation, and analysis
- Identifying a set of universal measures of father support and related outcomes

THE EXAMPLE

[Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System for Dads](#)

Despite growing recognition of linkages between paternal involvement and perinatal health for children and mothers and improved development outcomes, there remains limited research on how the transition to fatherhood affects the health and well-being of fathers themselves.

For over three decades, the CDC's Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) has conducted annual surveillance of mothers' perinatal behaviors, attitudes, and experiences. PRAMS has proven successful in tracking health indicators over time, evaluating the effectiveness of public health programs, and addressing emerging health issues during the perinatal period.

Dr. Craig Garfield, professor of pediatrics at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and director of the Family and Child Health Innovations Program (FCHIP) at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, led development of PRAMS for Dads to collect data from fathers on their experiences during the transition to fatherhood. Building on the success and infrastructure of PRAMS, the pilot for fathers included more than 500 recent Georgia fathers. Topics covered on the PRAMS for Dads survey included:

- Fathers' physical and mental health
- Fathers' access to health care
- Fathers' access to and use of paternal leave
- Fathers' employment information

Initial survey results found:

- Half (50 percent) of fathers either did not take or took unpaid paternity leave.
- Almost all fathers (98 percent) expressed a desire to be involved in child rearing.
- Just 47 percent of fathers had primary care physicians.

PRAMS for Dads is an example of a unifying, public, and family health approach to child, father, and family well-being and how federal- and state-administered data collection tools can be leveraged for improved child and family outcomes.

South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families

The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families works to create stronger, more successful families by helping fathers build skills to effectively contribute to their children's healthy development. To capitalize on the opportunity to engage fathers to build strong families and communities, the center collects quantitative and qualitative data and conducts cost-benefit analyses, sharing its findings with stakeholders that include policymakers, health care professionals, employers, and family service organizations nationwide. A decade of research by the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families has helped solidify the case for investing in fathers. Based on the center's analysis, returns include:

- Better education outcomes for children
- Improved health and well-being for children and adolescents
- Entire families lifted out of poverty

Fatherhood Research & Practice Network

The Fatherhood Research & Practice Network (FRPN) promotes rigorous evaluation of programs for fathers with low incomes. Established by Temple University and the Center for Policy Research with funding from the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in 2013, FRPN goals include growing the field of researchers and practitioners collaborating to evaluate initiatives, contributing to the growing body of research demonstrating effective father supportive programming, and promoting the intentional and explicit inclusion of fathers in state-administered programs and policies for children and families.

Between 2013 and 2019, FRPN awarded more than \$1 million in grants to 20 research-practitioner teams to conduct evaluations on topics including improving co-parenting outcomes by engaging mothers in interventions and identifying strengths and limitations of web and mobile device-based interventions to engage fathers and deliver parenting content. In those six years, FRPN's State Planning Grant Initiative supported 11 states in developing long-term plans to enhance father inclusion through systems change efforts. Findings from 13 FRPN studies are highlighted in *New Research on Parenting Programs for Low-Income Fathers*, a new book co-edited by FRPN directors Dr. Jay Fagan and Dr. Jessica Pearson. FRPN is currently directed by Dr. Jessica Pearson and the Center for Policy Research.