



Applying Whole Family Approaches in Responsible Fatherhood Programs

Overview

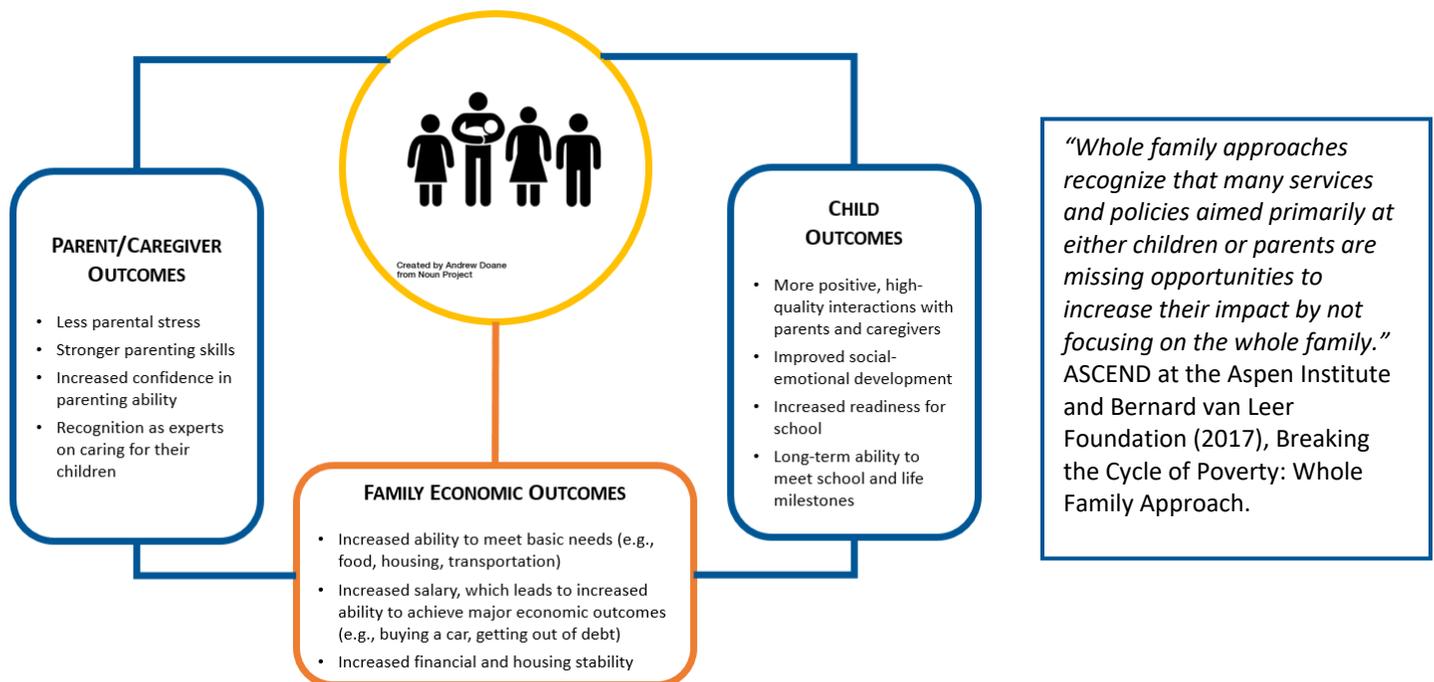
Whole family approaches, also known as two-generation or multigeneration approaches, attend to the needs of parents or caregivers and their children simultaneously.¹ The concept has mostly been applied to services for mothers and their children and has yet to be tested by responsible fatherhood programs. Although the ultimate goal of most fatherhood programs is to enhance child well-being, only a few programs focus directly on the needs of children. Whole family approaches that link services for fathers with services for their children and other family members could increase program impacts and strengthen outcomes for children and families.

This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse brief describes the whole family program approach, provides a brief history of efforts to involve the whole family, and considers ways in which these approaches might be applied to the work of responsible fatherhood programs.

What is a Whole Family Approach?

Children are more likely to thrive when they have healthy, stable, nurturing parents or caregivers who are emotionally and financially invested in their well-being.² However, parents’ ability to provide optimal environments for themselves and their children varies according to their access to basic resources and services, such as food, social networks, and health care. A whole family approach recognizes these intersecting needs and seeks to help parents and children thrive together by promoting children’s learning and healthy development while also providing services to help their parents succeed as caregivers and breadwinners.³

Example of Outcomes Targeted by a Whole Family Approach (Adapted from diagram created by the Center for Working Families in Atlanta)



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Evolution of Whole Family Programming and Lessons Learned

Because the first years of a child's life are a critical period for brain development and a time when foundations of emotional security can be established,^{4, 5} most whole family approaches have focused on combining services for young children with outreach and support for their parents, primarily mothers. One of the earliest examples of such programming is the Head Start program, which began in the 1960s with a focus on providing early childhood education combined with support for parents.

The term "two-generation program" was first used in the early 1990s when the Foundation for Child Development sponsored a publication on the concept as an intervention strategy for families in poverty.⁶ At that time, a number of promising initiatives augmented early childhood programs with self-sufficiency services for mothers or incorporated child care as a service for single mothers in education and employment programs.⁷ However, the results of those early efforts were not as robust as many advocates had hoped. It was difficult to fully integrate child-focused and parent-focused services,⁸ and research studies concluded that impacts might have been enhanced by more strategies to enhance economic stability,⁹ more support for direct-service staff, and a greater emphasis on data analysis to ensure that the level and intensity of services matched desired outcomes.¹⁰

The latest wave of multigeneration approaches has focused on the integration of services for children and parents and the application of advances in education and workforce development programs, including a focus on motivational interviewing and client coaching techniques.¹¹ There is also more recognition of the diversity of family situations and a growing awareness of the role that fathers, grandparents, and other family members play in children's development.¹²

Some organizations that have been providing services for mothers and children, such as the Jeremiah Program in Minneapolis and The Center for Working Families in Atlanta, have begun to add services specifically for fathers.¹³ Fatherhood programs can play an important role as these approaches continue to mature and, because they work with fathers who have children of varying ages, these programs have the potential to expand the reach of whole family approaches by offering or coordinating community services for older school-age children and adolescents.

Developing a Whole Family Approach in Fatherhood Programs

Fatherhood programs, particularly those with established community reputations, could enhance existing whole family or child-focused programs by providing outreach and services for the fathers of children in those programs. Alternatively, a fatherhood program could focus on expansion of their program services by adding services for the children of fathers in the fatherhood program. In the following sections, we consider each of these possibilities, offer ideas for occasional father-child activities, and provide some general tips for fatherhood practitioners.

Providing services for fathers of children in a child-focused or whole family program

Reaching out to community agencies that work with children might be the easiest first step for fatherhood programs interested in developing a whole family approach. There may be some child-serving organizations that recognize the importance of fathers but have struggled to fully engage them. And there may be other organizations that have already embraced the concept of whole family work but have only focused on developing services for children and their mothers. Fatherhood programs could offer to contact the fathers of enrolled children, learn more about their situation, and gauge their interest in participating in activities focused on parenting, relationship, or employment skills.

A fatherhood program could conduct a scan of local community services, then approach potential partner agencies to discuss the benefits of a whole family approach and explore how services for fathers might enhance outcomes for the families they work with. Potential partners include home visiting programs (in which qualified professionals engage infants in developmentally appropriate activities and help parents understand child development); early childhood or pre-K programs, such as Head Start; other educational or health services for children and families, such as Healthy Families or Healthy Start; TANF programs; and child welfare agencies.

Most well-designed whole-family approaches link two or more programs with shared goals around a family or build off a strong existing platform to integrate additional services via a partnership or an alignment of efforts with another organization. ASCEND at the Aspen Institute and Bernard van Leer Foundation (2017), Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: Whole Family Approach.

Expanding fatherhood program services to include children of participating fathers

Many fatherhood programs have demonstrated success in engaging fathers and providing services designed to enhance their parenting, employment, and relationship skills, but few have focused on direct ways to affect child outcomes. Adding

developmentally appropriate services for the children of program participants could enhance program outcomes, help the children build their foundational skills, prepare them to succeed in school, and improve their future employment prospects.

Some fatherhood programs are part of larger agencies that provide services for children. In such cases, the seeds of a whole family approach may already be in place and the agency may be able to intentionally develop parallel services for fathers and their children. Other programs will need to seek community partners who can provide child or youth programming that complements fatherhood program goals.

Collecting and analyzing information about participants' children (e.g., ages, where and with whom they live, level of father's involvement) would inform an assessment of where and how child-focused services might be provided. Because many fatherhood participants are nonresident fathers, an assessment of their relationships with the mothers of their children could help staff develop coparenting services and pave the way for involving children in activities. Most fatherhood programs routinely collect much of this information at intake and during individual case management meetings, but probing a bit deeper could help programs delineate subgroups of children and consider the types of services that might be provided. Depending on needs and availability of services, child-focused services might be offered for children of one or more specific subgroups of fathers (e.g., resident fathers, nonresident fathers, young fathers, incarcerated fathers, fathers of school-age children; fathers of teens and adolescents).

Examples of such services include:

- An early literacy intervention for children ages 0-5 years.
- Home visiting for young children of young or first-time fathers.
- A socio-emotional intervention for children that aligns with the fatherhood parenting curriculum.
- Support for children of incarcerated parents.
- Tutoring or mentoring for school-aged children.
- Before- or after-school programs.
- A financial management or relationship education program for teens.
- A mentoring or pregnancy prevention program for teens.
- Internship, volunteer, or summer job opportunities.
- Support for children as they navigate issues such as online bullying or peer pressure concerning sex, alcohol, or drugs.
- Specialized support for children with special needs or children who have been exposed to trauma.

Providing occasional father/child activities to augment a whole family approach

In addition to regularly scheduled skill-building activities for fathers and developmentally appropriate services for their children, a fatherhood program could also offer occasional fun activities for fathers and children to participate in together. These could be offered on a weekly or monthly basis, perhaps accompanied by a meal, and might include:

- Strictly fun family events, such as picnics, treasure hunts, softball games, or fishing outings.
- Group activities focused on learning basic reading, math, or science principles (see [Strong Fathers-Strong Families](#) for examples of activities provided for schools in Texas¹⁴).
- Structured social events, such as watching a short movie together, followed by learning activities for children and peer discussions for fathers (see [Reel Fathers](#) for a description of "Dads and Kids Movie Night" provided for Head Start programs in New Mexico).
- Partnership activities that build on other community events, such as library programs that provide regular parent-child reading activities.
- Opportunities for fathers to practice, and reflect on, the parenting skills they are learning. For example, prior to a father/child activity, staff could talk with fathers about ways to apply certain skills and then, after the activity, lead a discussion on how things went and any lessons learned.

General tips for fatherhood practitioners

- Develop a logic model that clearly indicates outcomes targeted by child-focused services, outcomes targeted by father-focused services, and whole family outcomes.

- Seek community partners who can provide child or youth programming that complements your fatherhood programming goals.
- Identify any whole family programs in your local community. There may be early childhood programs such as Healthy Start, Healthy Families, or Head Start that are already providing limited services for fathers of children in their programs. If so, you may be able to offer services that can further enhance outcomes for the fathers.
- As you talk with potential community partners, explain how combining your fatherhood program services with their child-focused services can enhance outcomes for all family members. Look for high-quality early childhood programs that might be interested in adding education and employment training services for parents.
 - Emphasize the benefits of how fatherhood services can enhance parenting and coparenting skills while building social capital and attending to health and well-being.
- When working with nonresidential fathers, look for ways to help them engage with the mothers of their children in positive ways, and involve mothers in services when possible.
- If you work with incarcerated fathers, identify any local programs that provide support for the children of incarcerated fathers. If such programs do not exist in your community, talk with others who may be able to help develop programs that could help these children process their situation, develop community and peer support networks, and prepare for the return of their fathers.
- As with all partnership projects, ensure that everyone has a mutual understanding of goals and responsibilities, develop clear written contracts or memorandums of understanding, identify contact points at each partner agency, and arrange for regular meetings to share information and monitor progress.

Conclusion

Based on our review of the relevant literature, a critical feature of any whole family approach will be the coordination of parallel programs for parents and for children.¹⁵ It will also be necessary to develop a strategy to ensure that services are provided for fathers and their children over a period long enough to achieve the outcomes indicated by any specific program models or curricula employed.

It will not be possible to provide services for all children of fathers in a fatherhood program or for all fathers of children in a child-focused program, but beginning to provide services for some fathers and their children will represent an opportunity to learn more about the possibilities of the whole family approach for fatherhood work. Most importantly, it could lead to improved outcomes for fathers and their families.

The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse will continue the investigation of current and promising programs and will continue to inform both the fatherhood field and the emerging two-generation field. We invite any organizations with relevant experience or comments to contact us via email (info@fatherhood.gov).

The Helpful Resources and References sections below provide links for more information on whole family work.

Helpful Resources

Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation

- [Integrated Approaches to Supporting Child Development and Improving Family Economic Security, 2015 - 2018](#)

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

- [Creating Opportunity for Families: A Two-Generation Approach](#)

ASCEND at the Aspen Institute

- [Fathers are Critical to Families' Climb up the Economic Ladder](#)
- [Making Tomorrow Better Together: Report of the Two-Generation Outcomes Working Group](#)

ASCEND at the Aspen Institute and the Bernard van Leer Foundation

- [Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: Whole Family Approach](#)

American Public Human Services Association

- [Whole Family Approach to Workforce Engagement](#)



Center for Law and Social Policy, Inc.

- [Two-Generational Strategies Can Help Fathers, Too](#)
- [Thriving Children, Successful Parents: A Two-Generation Approach to Policy](#)

Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath)

- [Families Disrupting the Cycle of Poverty: Coaching with an Intergenerational Lens](#) – this 2016 report describes a model for working with whole families in a way that addresses each adult and child in a family as well as the family as a whole.

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

- [Two-Generation Approaches to Working with Fathers](#) – the materials from this 2016 webinar include an overview of three two-generation programs and a list of additional resources.

Urban Institute

- [A Theoretical Framework for Two-Generation Models: Lessons from the HOST Demonstration](#)

This brief was developed by Nigel Vann at Fathers Incorporated on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

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² Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. *Building Core Capabilities for Life: The Science Behind the Skills Adults Need to Succeed in Parenting and in the Workplace*, 2016. <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Building-Core-Capabilities-for-Life.pdf>.

³ Janice M Gruendel. *Two (or More) Generation Frameworks: A Look Across and Within*, 2014.

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