



Helping Fathers Build Essential Skills for Workforce Success

Responsible Fatherhood programs often have a strong focus on workforce development activities. The federal Office of Family Assistance requires their Responsible Fatherhood grantees to provide economic stability activities, such as job training, employment services, and career-advancing education,¹ and other fatherhood programs typically recognize the importance of helping fathers improve their ability to provide financially for themselves and their children. Workforce development activities generally include training for specific job skills (such as welding, automotive mechanics, or commercial driver's licensing)²; however, to be successful in the workplace, employees also need good social and communication skills. One of the best ways practitioners can help fathers prepare for workforce success is by providing training in non-technical skills (also called job readiness, life, or "soft" skills), which include social skills and work habits such as effective communication, dependability, teamwork, integrity, and self-control. This discussion brief details the importance of these valuable skills and offers tips for programs working with fathers. We draw on current research, as well as telephone and in-person conversations with Responsible Fatherhood programs conducted by National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse staff.

Importance of Job Readiness Skills for Employers, Job Seekers, and Employees

Although employers need employees with the academic or technical skills necessary for specific jobs,³ they also recognize the importance of hiring individuals with strong life skills. In 2015, about one-third of U.S. employers reported trouble filling job openings,⁴ often because applicants lacked essential skills such as:

- Oral and written communication
- Professionalism
- Attention to detail
- Customer service
- Organizational skills
- Teamwork
- Persistence
- Flexibility
- Problem-solving
- Enthusiasm
- Motivation
- Willingness to learn⁵

The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families provides employment boot camps at Program Centers around the state.

- *They discovered that their employment services are most effective when they include a focus on positive attitudes, eye contact, speaking clearly and confidently, networking, and other job readiness skills.*
- *Staff report that fathers can get jobs with certifications and technical training, but they need job readiness skills training to keep their jobs.*

When unable to find employees with these necessary skills, employers have reported higher employee turnover and a reduced ability to compete with other organizations or meet clients' needs.⁶

Studies also show that individuals are more successful at searching for a job, earn higher wages, and retain employment longer when their academic or technical skills are complemented by strong life skills.⁷ Therefore, fatherhood programs that emphasize job readiness skills training are likely to see an increase in the number of participants who reach their goals related to job placement, job retention, job advancement, and longer term financial outcomes.

Tips for Programs

Fatherhood program participants are often focused on finding a job quickly due to financial pressures, but many of the skills needed to secure a new or better job require effort and cannot be improved overnight. Practitioners report that fathers may begin a program very enthusiastically, with the goals of obtaining a good job immediately and being promoted to more stable,

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better employment quickly. Unfortunately, this is not the reality for most individuals, and creative program approaches may be needed to keep fathers involved in the program long enough to strengthen their technical *and* life skills.

The following tips from experienced practitioners may help more fathers prepare for workforce success.

Promote father buy-in

- Help fathers think through their long-term employment goals.
 - Talk about their employment history. If they have employment gaps or have moved from one low-wage job to another, help them identify the reasons for this and talk about the need to change their approach or upgrade their skills.
 - Explain how investing more time to improve their technical *and* life skills can improve their employability, and also lead to healthier relationships with their family and friends.⁸
- Share success stories from program graduates who achieved their employment goals. Better yet, invite graduates to come and talk directly with current participants about the benefits of improving their job readiness skills.
- Provide examples of how job readiness skills can lead to better job opportunities.
 - Ask fathers to share examples of problems that can occur on a job and discuss when life skills are important at work.
 - Present a case scenario in which an individual has all of the technical skills necessary for a job, but doesn't communicate with their manager about arriving late for work or having too much work to complete in the time allotted. Help participants understand how the manager would feel in this situation.

Set realistic, achievable employment goals

- Help fathers understand that finding employment they are happy with, which also meets their financial needs, is a long-term process.
 - Setting more realistic, achievable short-term goals can help preempt disappointment later and promote long-term employment success.
 - Some programs help fathers obtain temporary, part-time, or transitional jobs to help them meet immediate financial needs and build their resume while they complete their training.
- Help fathers identify their priorities and develop long-term plans to best suit their needs.
 - Accurate job readiness and career assessments can identify their skills and work interests, predict the types of work for which they are best suited, and match them with the necessary training programs and potential jobs.
 - See [Spotlight on the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families](#) for examples of how programs in South Carolina help fathers develop "One Man Plans."

Use a strengths-based approach

- Focus on the skills and strengths that each father has.
- Be aware that program participants may have suffered traumatic life experiences as children or adults (e.g., emotional neglect, physical abuse, losing a loved one, incarceration) that affect their mental health and can lead to problems trusting others or maladaptive patterns of communication.⁹ See [Trauma-Informed Approaches and Awareness for Programs Working with Fathers](#) for more information.
 - Help fathers acknowledge strengths that they may not have recognized in themselves. For example, emphasize that individuals with trauma may have a lot of grit or perseverance.¹⁰
- Ensure that staff are trained to empathize with and understand the fathers with whom they are working, bolster their confidence, help them recognize skills and strengths of which they may not be aware, and guide their development.

Promote job readiness skills in all aspects of programming

- Reinforce the importance of job readiness skills in every interaction with fathers. For instance, point out how good listening skills can improve communication on the job and at home.
- Consider rewarding fathers who arrive on time for sessions (perhaps with gift certificates, lunch coupons, or bus tokens) to reinforce the importance of timeliness and dependability.



- Some programs apply consequences for fathers who are late or miss sessions without notifying program staff. Consequences might vary from apologizing to the group, missing out on a planned event, having to repeat the full session later, or leaving the program.
- Ensure that all program staff act as good role models by being on time for meetings with fathers, being respectful and caring with all fathers, and being responsive to emails and phone calls.
- Integrate effective coaching models into Fatherhood programming. For example, train staff to provide rapid feedback to participants about essential skills with a focus on developing weaknesses into strengths and compensating for weaknesses via other strengths.

Emphasize continuous improvement and adaptability

- Explain that there is always room for improvement and learning new skills. Getting ahead requires a commitment to continuous improvement and the ability to adapt to changing labor market circumstances.
- Talk with fathers about how communication styles may need to change based on factors such as who the other person is (e.g., supervisor, peer, spouse, child), the format of communication (e.g., in-person, email, phone, text), or the setting (e.g., work, home, one-on-one, peer group).
- Encourage fathers to learn from each social or work interaction they have and continually look for ways to improve their social skills and work habits.
- Ensure that all staff are trained to recognize and utilize opportunities to model, promote, and practice social skills with program participants during parenting groups, family events, and other program activities.

Develop a positive program reputation

- Ensure that local employers know about the program and the skill sets that program graduates can offer employers.
 - It can be difficult for job applicants to “prove” these skills or demonstrate their value to potential employers, so the work of program staff in developing relationships with employers is often key to creating job opportunities for fathers.
 - Encourage participants to include their technical and life skills training achievements on their resumes or job applications. As more employers learn about the program, the value of being a graduate of the program will continue to increase.
- Focus on matching participant job readiness skills with employer needs to maximize opportunities for long-term partnership relationships with employers.
 - Build a thorough understanding of the local labor market and specific employer needs.
 - Match this with a thorough and realistic understanding of participants’ strengths and weaknesses.
 - Ensure that fathers are fully “job ready” before recommending them to an employer, and always provide follow-up support for the new employee and the employer. A successful placement may lead to openings for future participants, whereas a problematic placement may not.
- Encourage program graduates to share their success stories with fathers, employers, and potential community partners.
- Fathers who have excelled at developing their own job readiness skills can help enhance a program’s community reputation with other fathers and may bring talents as recruiters, mentors, or staff members. The Anthem Strong Families program in Dallas, Texas, has success with this approach; about half of their staff are previous program participants and are able to connect and relate with fathers on a highly personal level.
- Program graduates who become valued employees also play a key role in cementing a program’s reputation with employers and other

The Anthem Strong Families program has found key roles for program graduates.

- *About half of their staff are former program participants and they bring unique abilities to connect and relate with fathers on highly personal levels.*
- *Other program graduates also found the program to be so inspirational that they chose to stay involved and help promote the program to others in their community.*

The program also emphasizes the importance of job readiness skills. Program staff report that participants who dedicate themselves to improving their job readiness skills are the most likely to find stable employment.



community partners. Encouraging them to share their personal success stories with colleagues and friends, and finding opportunities for them to speak at public forums are good strategies for maintaining a positive program reputation and emphasizing the quality of the program.

Conclusion

Helping fathers prepare for workforce success by improving essential job readiness skills will increase their chances of finding and retaining employment, which will, in turn, increase their ability to provide financial support for their children. Improved relationship, self-regulation, and communication skills in the workplace can also lead to stronger relationships with their children and other family members. The types of skills that are transferable to their relationships with their children include social skills, self-control, communication, dependability, positive attitude, and responsibility. Children will mimic and learn from their father's use of these skills, which will, in turn, help them be more successful in school and into adulthood.¹¹ Ultimately, this helps achieve the goal of all Fatherhood programming—to help fathers be better parents and to help them have more positive outcomes for themselves and their families.

Helpful Resources

- [Soft Skills Starter Kit & Guide](#) – This guide from the Washington State Human Resources Council is designed to help human resources and training professionals develop soft skills training for their employees and includes an insightful overview of the role of soft skills in the workplace.
- [Soft Skills 101: How to Effectively Identify, Assess & Teach the Top 8 Soft Skills for Workplace Readiness](#) – This free one-hour workshop from Conover Company will help prepare fathers for the workplace.
- [Soft Skills: Some Suggested Resources](#) – This resource guide from Oklahoma's Curriculum and Instructional Materials Center provides a comprehensive list and overview of available free soft skills resources.
- [MaxKnowledge](#) – This website offers free online tutorials focusing on soft skills development and training.
- [Competency Matters: Soft Skills Research and Resources](#) – This website provides access to research reports, webinars, and videos focusing on soft skill development.
- [Hard Work on Soft Skills: Creating a Culture of Work in Workforce Development](#) – This report from the Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS) is useful for practitioners because it describes approaches used by four different workforce development programs to prepare participants for the workforce.
- [21st-Century or "Soft" Skills](#) – This webpage offers links to employability guides and research on soft skills and employability.
- [National Employer Survey Results](#) – This infographic from Wonderlic on soft skills and their importance in the workplace is a great tool for enabling practitioners to relay the importance of soft skills to fathers.
- [Unimenta Free Webinars](#) – This website offers a free webinar series on soft skills and training expertise.
- [CareerOneStop](#) – This website has created a Skills Profiler that helps users identify their workplace skills and offers access to the *mySkills myFuture* portal, which matches occupational experience to other careers where those skills will transfer. In addition, there is a link to *O*NET*, which enables users to look up occupations that match their strongest skills.
- [Employer Engagement Toolkit](#) – This toolkit from Heartland Alliance can help practitioners who are administering transitional or employment programming show potential employers the benefits of working with fatherhood employment programs.

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