
Engaging Dads and Father Figures at WIC

TOOLKIT UPDATED 2025
CALIFORNIA WIC ASSOCIATION





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ENGAGING DADS AND FATHER FIGURES AT WIC

INTRODUCTION

As a leader in family support for decades, it is important for WIC to engage dads and father figures as we provide services for their partners and children. There are significant social and intellectual benefits to children with involved Dads: greater empathy, healthier relationships with peers, higher self-esteem, more self-control and less impulsive behavior, more generous, increased curiosity and less fear in new situations, greater tolerance for stress and frustration, higher verbal skills, and better school performance to name a few. (Adapted from “Positive Father Involvement” by Minnesota Fathers & Families Network) Dads and father figures also benefit from being involved with their children! Dads and father figures gain self-confidence, have a greater sense of overall wellbeing and are better able to express their emotions.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Some staff members may have challenging personal histories with men, and certain situations involving fathers or families might trigger uncomfortable emotions. It is crucial to remember that each dad and father figure is an individual, and personal experiences should not hinder men’s involvement. If staff members find their feelings overwhelming, seeking support from employee assistance programs or mental health professionals is encouraged.



HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

The purpose of this toolkit is to foster a welcoming environment for men and/or those who identify as dads or father figures. When we use these terms, we are referencing cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary dads and father figures. WIC is a welcoming place, and we strive to be inclusive. We suggest you adapt the toolkit’s recommendations to your WIC program as needed; not every suggestion will be suitable. However, there is always room to grow and learn. If you see anything in these documents that needs to be updated with language that is more inclusive or culturally competent, please let us know.

“Staff members need opportunities to develop empathy and respect for men and to build positive relationships that support fathers’ goals for themselves and their children. Men, too, benefit from having trusting relationships. In predominantly female programs, building effective partnerships with fathers requires the ability and desire to build trust between female staff and men.”

-Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families

“When staff members are open to fathers, affirm their diversity, and exhibit respectful curiosity about differences, fathers and families will feel accepted. Part of having open-minded attitudes means developing an awareness of your own biases based on first impressions of how fathers look, dress, or talk. Staff should avoid making assumptions about fathers to build trusting relationships and to help them feel welcome, respected, and understood.”

-Head Start Father Engagement Programming Guide



BEGIN ENGAGING DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

1. REACH OUT AND TRAIN YOUR STAFF ON INVOLVING DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

Consider these strategies to better engage your staff, with a focus on dads and father figures:

- Introduce the idea to your coworkers (or continue the conversation if this issue has been discussed before).
- Review or learn about the benefits of dad's and father figure's involvement. (See more on this in the *Communicate with Dads and Father Figures* section.) Train staff members on ways to include and interact with dads and father figures so that staff can develop positive, goal-oriented relationships with them.

A successful training may include:

- Improving staff's observation, communication, and assessment skills.
- Reflecting and examining stereotypes about dads and father figures held by staff.
- Exploring ways to connect with and support dads and father figures in their relationships with their children.



2. PROMOTE HEALTHY AND INCLUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN WIC SETTINGS

- Maintain open communication if new concerns arise.
- Review hiring practices and advertise new positions in a way that might attract male-identified workers to the position.
 - Mention your new focus on dads and father figures and include a phrase like "WIC celebrates gender diversity; all are encouraged to apply."
- Help female staff become comfortable working with men.
 - Hold training sessions in an environment where staff feel safe and comfortable expressing their concerns.
 - Be sensitive toward female staff who may have had negative personal experiences with men and provide additional training if needed.





3. BE SENSITIVE TO THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

- Encourage staff to engage in positive discussions with dads and father figures about parenting. Families will find these more helpful than judgments about right and wrong.
 - Men from different backgrounds may have different views than staff about discipline, nurturing, sleeping arrangements, and their role as men in raising children.
 - Consider language and other cultural and social barriers.
 - Cultural sensitivity may also include hiring staff that reflect the linguistic and cultural composition of families involved in the program.
- It is important for program directors and managers to support their staff as they reflect on their cultural experiences.
- Professional development can emphasize the importance of inclusive attitudes and behaviors.

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Engage staff through training about including dads and father figures.
- Examine your hiring practices to better include men.
- Focus on how staff can better work with dads and father figures.
- Be sensitive to staff who may have a hard time working with men and provide additional support.
- Be aware of and sensitive to the cultural diversity of dads and father figures.
- Support your fellow staff in developing their cultural awareness.

Resources:

- [Engaging Men and Dads at WIC Toolkit from National WIC Association, 2021](#)
- [Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide, especially the "Staff Development Learning Extensions" \(p. 55-58\) and "Professional Development" \(p.19-25\)](#)
- [Las Manos de Apá Project: Creating Programs that Respect the Unique Language & Culture of Latino Fathers, Tip Sheet from Head Start](#)
- [Las Manos de Apá: The Hands of My Father: Staff Training Materials, staff training materials for working with Latino fathers from Head Start](#)
- [Step by Step - Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families from Best Start Resource Centre, especially "Women Working with Men" p.20](#)



MAKE THE ENVIRONMENT FRIENDLY TO DADS & FATHER FIGURES

WIC staff can make minor changes to the physical environment to make your WIC office feel more father figure friendly!

"Feeling welcome, feeling accepted, feeling invited... I think that's the most important thing. Acknowledging that fathers matter and that we want them involved is the first step."

-Samuel Nuñez, Fathers and Families of San Joaquin

1. MAKE THE OFFICE LOOK WELCOMING TO DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

To better include dads and father figures WIC staff can:

- Display positive and nurturing images of dads and father figures with their children in the office.
 - Hang posters that talk about the importance of fatherhood.
 - Display pictures of breastfeeding where dads and father figures are included.
 - Consider having a bulletin board where clients can post pictures of children with their dads or father figures.
 - Be mindful of posters about child support or domestic violence. These messages are important but should not overpower positive images of men.
- In waiting areas, include:
 - Magazines that men would feel comfortable reading.
 - Resources, booklets, and pamphlets that deal with issues dads and father figures may face.
 - Materials advertising your WIC office or special events that include images of dads and father figures.
- Have neutral colors and furnishings in the office.

- Provide size-appropriate chairs for males in waiting areas and have two chairs stationed at each counseling desk.
- Offer books for children to read that feature male characters in nurturing roles.
- Be sure to have a men's or gender-neutral restroom and ensure that it has a diaper changing station.

2. HAVE MEN PRESENT IN THE OFFICE

Research has shown that dads and father figures feel more comfortable if there are other men at the WIC office. The current WIC staff could consider:

- Hiring male staff.
- Inviting men to be peer counselors or group facilitators.
- Looking to community partners for men who may be interested in being involved.
- Asking board members or other stakeholders who may be able to help.
- Approaching partners of staff who may be able to step into the role of facilitator.
- Finding dads or father figures who are committed and consistent in the program to volunteer and reach out to other dads and father figures.
- Making a list of different ways that men can volunteer if they want to be involved in the program.





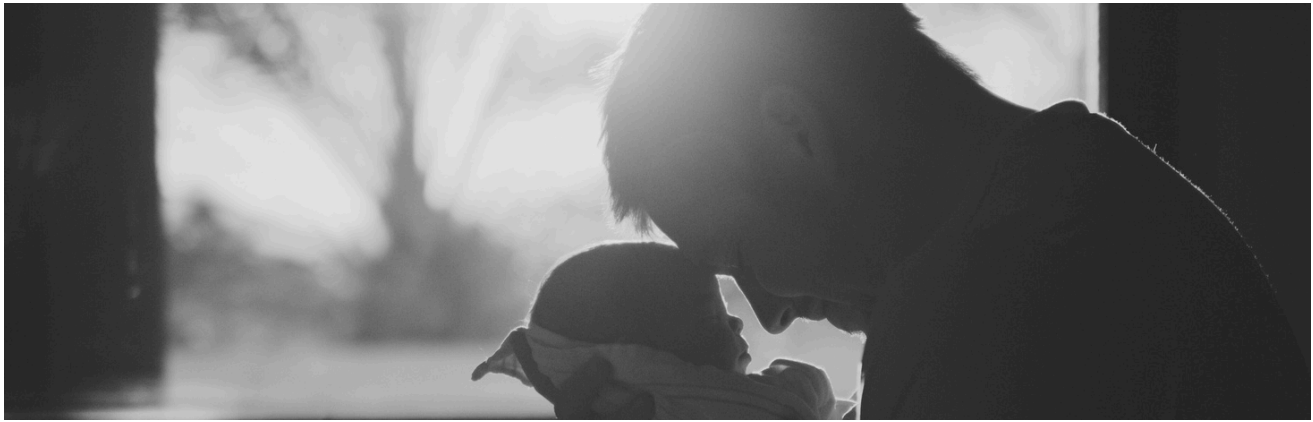
3. CONSIDER SCHEDULING CONFLICTS FOR DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

Research done by the Minnesota Fathers and Families network (linked in Resources below) found that the largest perceived barrier to father figures involvement in early childhood programs was fathers' lack of time. WIC staff can:

- Schedule appointments at times when the dad or father figure can attend.
- Have flexible or extended hours when possible.
- Offer evening or weekend classes and activities or explore early morning (before dads and father figures go to work, school, etc.) as a possibility.
- When planning a special event, send out a brief survey or poll to see when the best time would be so more dads and father figures can attend. Offer three different time and date options.
 - If your families are computer savvy, use a website like Doodle or NeedToMeet to find a suitable time for the event.

Let families know of special events well in advance so dads and father figures can schedule around them if they have any flexibility in their work schedules.





4. BE CREATIVE!

If your WIC site wants to take things a step further, consider trying some of these innovative ideas:

- Install a shelf in the waiting room where people can donate or borrow books. Provide space for dads and father figures to read to their children while they wait for their class or appointment.
- Offer “Stay and Play” or “Men’s Time” if your office has the capacity. Have days when children can stay and play, and make sure you specifically invite dads and father figures.
- Have an open house for dads and father figures or a father-child event where you provide food and refreshments. Consider reaching out to community partners for food donations.
- Have a special orientation event for dads and father figures in the lives of your WIC families.
 - Ask dads and father figures for ideas on how they would like to be involved.
 - Ask dads and father figures about what might prevent them from being involved at WIC and what would support them.
- Conduct a brief survey to gather feedback from dads and father figures.
- Go beyond acknowledging Father’s Day: have a month where the focus is positive father-child relationships.
- See the Community Partnership section for more fun and innovative ways to reach out to dads and father figures.

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Make the WIC office “father figure-friendly” by including pictures, books and reading materials that show dads and father figures in a positive light.
- Make sure that the office is comfortable and accessible for men.
- Encourage the presence of men at the office by hiring men or having men as facilitators and volunteers.
- Plan around dads’ and father figures’ schedules when possible.
- Be creative when reaching out and try different kinds of events.



Resources:

- [Engaging Men and Dads at WIC Toolkit from National WIC Association, 2021](#)
- [Calling all Dads - Tips for Getting Involved in Your Child's Preschool or Child Care Program from NAEYC](#)
- [Fatherhood from Family Resource Information, Education, and Network Development Service](#)
- [Fostering Fathers' Leadership Skills from Head Start](#)



COMMUNICATE DIRECTLY WITH DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

Techniques for including dads and father figures at WIC can be simple and straightforward!

1. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

- Learn men's names. A simple "Good Morning, Michael" can go a long way in making a dad or father figure feel welcome!
- Engage dads and father figures in short conversations. (See Conversation Starters below.)
- Encourage the participants to invite dads and father figures to come to at least one office visit.
 - If time allows, engage dads and father figures by asking if they have any questions or concerns.
 - Listen to and answer dads and father figures' questions.
- Welcome dads and father figures with enthusiasm,
 - But treat their presence as normal instead of something unusual.
 - Welcome all parental figures with the same body language and eye contact.
- Treat father figures as equals within the parenting equation, if appropriate
 - Let them know that you see them as important to family development.
 - Control your biases when talking with men. It can be apparent when they are seen as an optional extra rather than a key part of the family and parenting team.
 - Do not assume that only mothers oversee certain things such as parent-teacher conferences, doctor visits, childcare, cooking, etc.



"Many programs have learned that building trust, developing relationships and making personal contacts are the most successful methods in getting fathers more involved."

-Sector Analysis: Linking Fathers from Minnesota Fathers & Families Network



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Here are some ideas for getting dads and father figures to talk about what is important to them in their relationship with their child:

- What has your infant/child taught you?
- When did something special happen between the two of you?
- Have you changed something about yourself because of your infant/child?
- What have you done to make things better for your infant/child?
- What habits help you and your partner raise your infant/child together?
- What would your partner say are your special skills that you contribute to the family?

Adapted from Step by Step - Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families



2. TARGET INFORMATION TO DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

- Describe your program using inclusive language. Dads and father figures can speak different languages and come from different backgrounds, each with their own unique cultural perspective. Leave the door open for dads and father figures to tell you what they need and how they would prefer to communicate.
- Aim for dad-inclusive activities to be well-organized and show that inclusivity is a priority in your agency.
- Explain to dads and father figures that their involvement is vital for their child's development and success. See the sidebar for benefits that children gain from dads' involvement.
- Make clear that information is for dads and father figures by providing leaflets and information that specifically mention and include pictures of men.
- Suggest concrete activities and explain how the activity will benefit the child's growth. Many men are more comfortable participating in child development when they are given clear and defined tasks.
- Consider including some material targeted specifically toward dads and father figures in your regular prenatal classes.
- Be specific (dad, father figure, men, etc.) when you want to contact or include men. 'Parent' is often interpreted as 'mother.'
 - For example, invite "Moms, Dads, and Caregivers" to an event rather than just "Parents."
- What about same-sex couples? Consider adding inclusive or gender-neutral language to your forms:
 - Parent/guardian(s)
 - Parent 1 and Parent 2
 - Caregiver(s)
 - Questions include: "Who are the people responsible for your child's care?"
- Take advantage of social media (especially if you have a lot of younger dads and father figures):
 - Send email updates or newsletters about dad-friendly events.
 - Consider using social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or X (formerly known as Twitter) to remind dads and father figures about special events.



3. ENCOURAGE OR PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DADS AND FATHER FIGURES TO LEARN ABOUT PARENTING

- Encourage new parents to seek out information and support related to fathering.
- Provide dads and father figures with online resources that they can turn to for help. (Use the 'Resources for Dads' list as an appendix to this toolkit.)
- Suggest that dads and father figures join parenting or peer groups to gain support and knowledge.
- Provide peer groups or parenting classes if your WIC site has the capacity.
- Support men in their development as dads or father figures. (See the sidebar for the various roles a dad can play. Each dad and father figure will have strengths in some areas and will need to work on developing others.)

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Build positive relationships with dads and father figures. Invite dads and father figures to be a part of WIC activities through social media or in-person. Use dad-friendly language.
- Tell dads and father figures about how their child benefits from their involvement. Provide dads and father figures with resources to learn about parenting.
- Encourage dads and father figures to join parenting support groups or classes.

Resources:

- [Engaging Men and Dads at WIC Toolkit from National WIC Association, 2021](#)
- [Getting and Keeping Fathers Interested in Your Program from National Fatherhood Initiative](#)
- [Reaching out to Fathers: An Examination of Staff Efforts that Lead to Greater Father Involvement in Early Childhood Programs from Stephen Green, Early Childhood Research & Practice](#)
- [Step by Step - Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families from Best Start Resource Centre](#)



EMPOWER DADS AND FATHER FIGURES TO SUPPORT MOMS AND BREASTFEEDING

Research tells us that support from a mother's partner is an important factor in the decision to breastfeed their baby! Given the importance of partner support, it's valuable to educate fathers (and expectant fathers) on the benefits of breastfeeding.

1. EDUCATE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF BREASTFEEDING

Dads and father figures may not be aware of the reasons to breastfeed. WIC staff can teach them about the benefits to the baby and mom. You may want to share the following benefits of breastfeeding:

- Stimulates brain growth as breast milk helps the baby's IQ reach its full potential
- Fewer doctor visits (breast milk lowers the baby's risk of allergies, asthma, and infections)
- Less expensive than formula
- Helps a mom stay calm and bond with her baby (the hormones produced while breastfeeding help women relax)
- Protects a mom against excessive bleeding after delivery, delays the return of her period, and lowers her risk of cancer

"Getting started breastfeeding and keeping it up for the first year of the baby's life - as the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends - is so much easier when the new mother and father act as a team, encouraging each other and helping each other to be supportive, involved parents... First-time parents, especially, must remember that they must work together to learn how to become good parents...A new mother is just as scared as the father is of doing the wrong thing. Confidence comes with spending time with the baby...and with practice."

-"Breastfeeding: How Can Dad Help?" by Robina Riccitiello



2 LISTEN TO AND ADDRESS DAD'S AND FATHER FIGURES' CONCERNS

Dads and father figures may have concerns about their partner breastfeeding. WIC staff can:

- Listen to dads and father figures and acknowledge their concerns as valid.
- Respond to dad's and father figures' concerns in a supportive way.



You can use the following table as a guide:

Dad's or Father Figure's Concerns About Breastfeeding	Reassure them..
Feeling left out if their partner breastfeeds	A partner's support is so important while a mom is breastfeeding, and there are lots of ways dads and father figures can help (see the next page). There are also many ways he can bond with his baby without being involved with feeding, such as soothing, bathing, and playing!
Pain their partner may experience with breastfeeding	In general, there should be little or no pain with breastfeeding. If their partner and baby are having a hard time, the dad or father figure can take them to WIC or a doctor for help
Whether their partner will make enough milk	Usually, when partners eat healthy, drink plenty of water, and baby latches on demand, moms produce enough breast milk.
That breastfeeding will interfere with their relationship or sex life with their partner	Having a baby changes your sex life whether the baby is given the mom's milk or formula. The first 6 weeks are tiring for the mom. Her body needs time to heal from the trauma of birth. Both of you will need to adjust to the big change in your home life. You will need to plan for time alone with each other. This will be true no matter how the baby is fed
That breastfeeding will ruin their partner's breasts	Breastfeeding does not damage women's breasts! Any changes in breasts' appearance are caused by pregnancy itself, not whether or not a woman breastfeeds.
Whether breastfeeding will be too difficult	A dad or father figure can make things much easier on his partner by providing the support outlined in the next pages.



3. ENCOURAGE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES TO SUPPORT PARTNERS BEFORE BIRTH

When a couple is expecting, paternal support is important, and early involvement builds the bond between father, mother, and child, easing the transition to fatherhood.

While mother is pregnant, WIC staff can suggest for a dad or father figure to:

- Attend prenatal classes to learn about breastfeeding and how to be supportive during labor. Help pack the hospital bag (including a change of clothes and toiletries for himself).
- Prepare for the baby by helping choose items like a crib, car seat, and stroller.
- Support his partner by helping with household chores and following WIC's healthy eating tips.
- Make sure that his partner gets enough rest.

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Listen to and acknowledge dad's and father figures' concerns around breastfeeding.
- Educate and/or reassure dads and father figures about the benefits of breastfeeding.
- Provide suggestions of how a dad or father figure can support his partner during pregnancy or after the baby is born and while mom is breastfeeding.

Resources:

- [A Guide to Breastfeeding from California WIC](#)
- [Breastfeeding: A Magical Bond of Love brochure from USDA](#)
- [Breastfeeding Basics for Dads from USDA](#)
- [Breastfeeding Duties for Dads from Mama Say What!? Fathers Can Support Breastfeeding poster from USDA For Fathers and Family from Maryland WIC](#)
- [Getting Prepared for Dad from Texas WIC](#)
- [Hey Dad! Encourage Mom to Breastfeed posters from Pennsylvania WIC](#)
- ["If I Could, I Would": Photographs of Breastfeeding Dads from Project Breastfeeding and TIME](#)
- ["Using Loving Support to Grow and Glow in WIC: Breastfeeding Training for Local WIC Staff" \(Module 4: Barriers to Breastfeeding, p.8-11\) from USDA](#)

4. HELP DADS AND FATHER FIGURES TO SUPPORT BREASTFEEDING PARTNERS

When the baby is born, WIC staff can suggest for a dad or father figure to:

- Encourage his partner to breastfeed
 - Reassure the mom that her partner has other ways to bond with the baby besides feeding.
 - Ask the mom what she wants her partner to do for her and the baby.
 - Praise the mom for doing a great job and be vocal in supporting her.
- Be a part of the feeding team:
 - Watch the baby for early signs of hunger (turning toward the mom's breast, sucking on a fist or making sucking noises) and bring the baby to the mom to breastfeed.
 - Bring the mom water and a healthy snack while she breastfeeds.
 - Make sure the mom is comfortable and has what she needs, like a pillow for support or burp cloths.
 - Keep her company or entertained while she is breastfeeding.
 - Help set up the breast pump if the mom pumps.
- Take on other baby care duties and make sure the mom gets enough rest:
 - Hold, cuddle, and bathe the baby.
 - Oversee diaper duty.
 - Get up with the baby at night (for non-feeding-related awakenings) so the mom can get a little more sleep.
 - Play with the baby or take him/her on a walk so that the mom can take a shower.
- Help by taking on household duties:
 - Help with chores and prepare healthy meals.
 - Care for the other children while the mom is breastfeeding.

Encourage dad or the father figure to join a peer group where dads and father figures discuss and learn about supporting their partners to breastfeed. (See more about this in the Peer Groups section of the toolkit.)



ENCOURAGE MOMS AND MOTHER FIGURES TO INCLUDE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

Men tend to be more involved in parenting when their partners are supportive and encouraging!

1. ADDRESS THE BARRIERS OF FATHERHOOD TO MOTHERS

In some families, a dad or father figure's relationship with his partner and her perception of his role may be barriers to men becoming more involved in their children's lives. Women may act as "gatekeepers" by regulating men's contact with the child(ren). While this is sometimes due to a bad relationship between the parents, it can occur for many other reasons.

Possible reasons why women may resist men's involvement:

- Efficiency – "It's faster if I feed the kids myself."
- Quality – "I do a better job of changing the babies' diapers."
- Sympathy – "I don't want to bother him while he's watching TV."
- Admiration – "He works so hard...he shouldn't have to come home and feed the kids too."
- Anger – (This happens a lot when parents are no longer romantically involved.)
- Cultural beliefs about gender roles – "Men don't prepare meals or change diapers...that's women's work."

If mothers are open to the discussion, WIC staff can share how their influence can encourage fathers' involvement, and how this involvement benefits everyone.

Moms and mother figures are key to engaging men because, despite fatherhood outreach, they're typically the primary caregivers present at WIC appointments.



To support moms in including dads and father figures, WIC staff can:

- Explain to mothers that their support is important in engaging dads and father figures.
- Work to address moms and mother figures' concerns and encourage them to collaborate.
- Get suggestions from moms and mother figures on how to best involve dads and father figures in WIC activities.
- Ask moms to schedule their next office visits for times when her partner can come in too.
- If delivering positive parenting programs, with mother's approval invite both mom and dad and father figure.

Encourage moms and mother figures to:

- Give their partners time with their children to learn how to comfort them, encouraging dads and father figures to be involved. This will improve men's confidence as parents and give mom a break.
- Give dads and father figures the benefit of the doubt: don't assume they do not want to be involved.
- Share and discuss with dads and father figures the information learned at WIC.



2. BE SENSITIVE TO MOM'S AND MOTHER FIGURES' FEELINGS AND CONCERNS

An unintended consequence of including dads and father figures in programming is that moms may feel left out. They may be concerned that they will lose ownership over the program if men get involved. Some may resent the program celebrating male engagement if men have not been as engaged as them in their children's life from the beginning.

To ease tension regarding special events or services for dads and father figures:

- Make sure there are parallel activities and groups for moms and mother figures. Ask for moms and mother figures' advice and input on male involvement.
- Offer moms and mother figures the opportunity to explore their feelings about being a co-parent. (See more on co-parenting below.)
- Remind moms and mother figures of the benefits to their children when men are involved.
- Be sensitive when suggesting mixed parenting groups, as many women may feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions in a group with men or vice versa. You may want to have separate male and female parent groups. However, it depends on the needs of your participants. (See section on parenting groups and benefits of couple's groups below.)



3. WHEN APPROPRIATE, FOCUS ON CO-PARENTING

Co-parenting is shared decision-making about what is in a child's best interest. Each parent still contributes unique strengths to the child-parent relationship but works together to make child-rearing decisions. Recent research has shown that the single strongest predictor of whether a dad or father figure will be involved with their child is the quality of his relationship with the child's mom. This is true whether the parents are in a romantic relationship with each other. Conflicts around child rearing are a primary source of marital/relationship problems.

Therefore, an emphasis on co-parenting, where parents work together and agree on the best ways to raise their child, has positive outcomes for the family.

WIC staff can encourage co-parenting and improve communication by:

- Suggesting to parents that it can strengthen the couple's relationship if both are "on the same page" when it comes to parenting.
- Considering the feelings and values of both parents when making suggestions.
- Affirming each parent's knowledge, understanding of their child, and acknowledging their unique contributions as a parent.
- Explaining the benefits a child receives when two parents are both supporting the child's well-being.
- Reminding parents that it takes time and effort to become an effective co-parenting team, so they should not feel discouraged if it is difficult at first.
- Promoting parenting classes and support groups at WIC or other community organizations.





4. THE BENEFITS OF PARENTING GROUPS:

Both men and women benefit from guidance and support during the transition to parenthood. The ‘Supporting Father Involvement Project’ showed that parenting group participation improved fathers’ warmth, encouragement, responsiveness, and limit-setting with their children. These benefits lasted for years after attending the parenting group.

Support groups for parents may include both parents or be specifically for either fathers/father figures or mothers/mother figures.

Couples’ groups have some additional benefits as well:

- Learning the same material creates a sense of teamwork in parenting.
- When parents share experiences in a group, it lessens the chance that one parent will be seen as more knowledgeable or skilled than the other.
- Parents experience improvements in their relationship, less conflict, and reduced parenting stress.

WIC staff may suggest, in the absence of a father, or if the mother prefers, an alternate contact (friend or family) may be added for support.

Additionally, in cases of family violence, it may be preferable for the mother and child(ren) to not involve the father. Ensure you have policies and procedures in place for handling families involved in court orders, custody battles, or domestic/family violence situations. Safe, honest, and respectful communication is essential for staff when engaging with dads and father figures in complex family dynamics.

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Explain to mothers the benefits of father involvement and to encourage fathers’ participation in the WIC services.
- Be sensitive to mother’s feelings and address their concerns about including the dad or father figure.
- Ask for women’s input on how dads and father figures could be involved.
- Encourage co-parenting and if possible, offer parenting groups at your WIC clinic or referrals to parenting groups in the community.

Resources:

- [Birth to Five Father Engagement Guide from Head Start Engaging Fathers and Male Caregivers from Head Start](#)
- [Father Engagement Strategies that Work from FRIENDS National Resource Center Fundamentals of Fatherhood Program from Long Beach WIC](#)
- [How to Get Dads Involved? It's a Family Affair from Berkeley Greater Good Science Center Step by Step - Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families from Best Start Resource Centre Supporting Father Involvement from Family Resource Centers](#)
- [The Nurturing Fathers Program from the Center for Growth and Development The Daddy-Baby Connection from Parenting Magazine](#)
- [Why Dads Are So Important from Texas Health and Human Services](#)



FOCUS ON WAYS DADS AND FATHER FIGURES CAN BOND WITH THEIR CHILDREN

There are plenty of ways dads can bond with their babies that support mothers and don't interfere with breastfeeding!

1. ENCOURAGE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES TO BOND WITH THEIR CHILDREN

WIC staff can encourage stronger relationships between fathers and their children. Use the following suggestions to support father-child relationships:

- Let dads and father figures know the strengths you see in their relationships with their children.
- Suggest that dads and father figures relate to their children by following their child's lead during play.
- Work alongside dads and father figures to pinpoint their children's needs and interpret their behaviors.
- Ask questions about a dad or father figure's perception of his child and share information to build a common understanding about his child's development.
- Seek opportunities to bolster a father's parenting abilities and foster positive parent-child connections.

Adapted from *Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families*



2. GUIDE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES IN BUILDING STRONG BONDS WITH THEIR CHILDREN.

WIC staff can also offer specific suggestions for how dads and father figures can bond with their children.

- Before the baby is born, WIC staff can explain to dads and father figures that they can start bonding with babies. Suggest that he can:

- Attend prenatal doctor's appointments.
- Listen to the baby's heartbeat and feel the baby kick.
- Talk, sing, or read to the baby while still in the mom's belly. This might seem cheesy, but the baby can hear you!
- Help the mom choose items like a crib and a car seat to prepare for the baby.
- After the baby is born, staff can suggest that a dad or father figure bond with them by:
 - Providing comfort, by holding the baby skin-to-skin or doing infant massage.
 - Singing or talking to the baby.
 - Cuddling and soothing the baby when they are upset. This might include waking up with the baby at night for non-feeding-related awakenings.
 - Gently rocking baby to sleep.
 - Burping the baby after breastfeeding if needed.
 - Changing diapers or dressing the baby.
 - Giving the baby a bath.
 - Playing with the baby with toys or simple hand games.
 - Taking baby for a walk.
 - Wearing a carrier that holds the baby close to the body.
 - Trying to make the baby laugh with funny faces or voices.
 - Taking the baby to a doctor's appointment.
- As children get older, a dad or father figure can bond and help by:
 - Teaching a new activity.
 - Listening to their child talk and responding to them.
 - Taking the child to daycare/preschool.
 - After 6 months, introducing solid foods.
 - Engaging in affordable and enjoyable activities with their child(ren), such as crafting, visiting the playground, or flying kites.
 - Including the child in their own activities at an age-appropriate level, such as giving kid-safe tasks in the kitchen or having kids help with yard work and gardening.



3. OFFER DADS AND FATHER FIGURES SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Given that dads and father figures may feel more comfortable interacting with their children when they have clearly defined roles, WIC staff could suggest that dads and father figures partake in some of the following areas of their child's development:

- WIC staff can introduce dads and father figures to the California WIC Baby Behavior Campaign (linked in Resources below) highlighting the most common behaviors: Staff can explain some common behavioral cues, such as:
 - If your newborn is hungry, they might keep their hands near their mouth, bend their arms and legs or make sucking noises.
 - If your baby is full, they might suck slower or stop sucking, relax their hands and arms, push away or fall asleep. If a baby wants to engage, they might have a relaxed face and body, stare at you or follow your voice and face.
 - If a baby wants a change in their environment, they might look away or arch their back, frown, or stiffen their hands, arms, and legs.
 - Responding to cues quickly may help the baby to cry less.

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Support dads and father figures to build relationships with their children.
- Suggest ways dads and father figures can bond and focus on active play with their children.
- Provide dads and father figures information about interpreting baby behavior.
- Encourage dads and father figures to read to their children.

- It can be especially helpful when the mom is first recovering from giving birth for her partner to be knowledgeable about baby behavior.

Encourage dads and father figures to focus on supporting healthy brain development in their child.

- To stimulate their baby's brain and help with language development, dads and father figures can read, talk and sing to their child.
- Suggest dads and father figures take their children to the library and participate in choosing books.
- Seek out reading programs that have a special focus on involving dads and father figures in their child's reading.

As their child gets a little bit older, dads and father figures can focus on active play.

- Dads and father figures can bring unique aspects to play exploration, persistence, and independence.
- Encourage dads and father figures to engage in active play or use their bodies as a gentle jungle gym.
- Suggest active games like gentle pillow fights or "sock wrestle" (see Toddlers Need Their Dads linked below).

Dads and father figures can take their kids to parks, playgrounds, or open gym time at children's gyms. Supporting active play from an early age will set up healthy habits for the future.



Resources:

- [Baby's Hunger Cues from USDA](#)
- [Getting to Know Your Baby from California WIC Baby Behavior Campaign](#)
- [Learn About Little-by-Little School Program from PHFE WIC](#)
- [Step by Step: Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families from Best Start Resource Centre: "Step 9: Consider Key Issues," p.34](#)
- [Supporting Father Involvement from California Department of Social Services](#)
- [Top Tips for Dads on Bonding with Your Baby from BabyCenter](#)



INCLUDE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES IN WIC PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

It's important to review your program's success in engaging dads and male role models. This will help you identify successes and areas for improvement.

1. ASSESS THE NEEDS OF DADS AND FATHER FIGURES BEFORE INCORPORATING THE SUGGESTIONS FROM THIS TOOLKIT.

You can create a survey addressing some (or all) of the following questions that better understand the needs of Dads and Father Figures in the community:

- What is the geographic area being served, and what are the racial and ethnic groups in the community?
- What attributes of the community make it easy or difficult to address dads and father figure's needs?
- What are dads and father figure's cultural backgrounds?
- What are dads and father figures' attitudes and perceptions of the WIC program? What are men's perspectives on fatherhood?
- What community services or activities could benefit dads and father figures, and where are the gaps in resources?
- Do dads and father figures have literacy concerns?
- What would dads and father figures like the program to do better? What support is needed to further engage dads and father figures in the program?

Adapted from "Father Engagement Assessment Questions," Head Start Father Engagement Guide

- You can also gather demographic information from local and state databases to get information about dads and father figures in your area.
- Having information about the dads and father figures in your community can help you choose activities that might be most effective in getting them involved!



2. DESIGN A TOOL TO MEASURE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR DAD AND FATHER FIGURE INCLUSION EFFORTS

After implementing some of the dad/father figure-friendly strategies described in this toolkit, evaluate them to see how they are going. This type of assessment can give you insight into what may work best for your community and how to improve your program.

WIC staff can survey to evaluate the office for successful outreach to dads and father figures. Use informal surveys should your agency allow them. You can use questions such as these or from additional resources linked below.

REFLECTIONS:

ASSESS YOUR FATHER FRIENDLINESS

1. Does the staff understand the role dad and father figures play in children's lives?
2. Do dads and father figures believe there is value to using the program?
3. Is there a male staff member that dads and father figures are able to connect with? Is there a male representative who is the contact person for leading fathering activities?
4. Is the physical environment welcoming to dads and father figures?
5. What biases may be influencing your efforts to engage dad and father figures?
6. Are there resources available that speak to dad and father figures?
7. Do promotion materials reflect dads and father figures in the wording and images?

Adapted from "Assess Your Father-Friendliness," Step by Step

Think about surveying both staff members and parents, with a special focus on dads and father figures.

You can also ask dads, father figures, and staff members for suggestions on how the program could be improved.

After you choose your questions, decide how to get responses. This may include:

- Phone calls
- In-person interviews
- Focus groups
- Written survey
- Online survey



3. IMPLEMENT YOUR TOOL TO EVALUATE HOW YOUR INCLUSION EFFORTS ARE GOING

- Survey the staff. Assess how staff members feel that the dad/father figure-friendliness efforts are going.
- Evaluate staff on their work with dads and father figures. This sends a clear message to your staff that involving dads and father figures is an important part of their jobs.
- Pursue verbal and written feedback from dads and father figures.
 - Have focus groups or meetings with dads and father figures to listen to and understand how they perceive your inclusiveness efforts.
- Establish procedures to protect the confidentiality of a dad and father figure's feedback, such as using an anonymous written form or having one-on-one meetings.
- Use the data you have collected to fine-tune your inclusion strategies and outreach efforts.
 - Review and update plans based on feedback from dads and father figures.
 - Monitoring should be ongoing or occur at key points during the year.



4. ONGOING ASSESSMENT

When you have an event for or including dads and father figures, set aside 10 minutes for dads, father figures, and staff to share ideas and get feedback. Staff can listen to how men would like to be involved.

Create brief, easy-to-use forms or questionnaires (sample below) asking dads and father figures their feelings about the program environment and their thoughts about how well they are relating to staff.

POTENTIAL QUESTIONNAIRE TO DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

- How comfortable do dads and father figures feel when talking with staff members when they come for appointments or when they participate in activities?
- How successful is the office/program in engaging them?
- What could the program do to encourage more dads and father figures to get involved?

Adapted from Involving Fathers in Early Years Settings

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Identify and assess the needs of dad and father figures before beginning your inclusion efforts.
- Create a tool to assess how well your program is meeting its goals.
- Use your evaluation tool to survey staff and parents, especially dads and father figures.
- Incorporate feedback into future planning.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for dads and father figures to give feedback on the program.

Resources:

- [Birth to Five Engagement Guide: Father Engagement Assessment Questions \(p.50\)](#), from Head Start Bonding and Caring for Your Baby from National Childbirth Trust
- [Creating Paths to Father Involvement: Lessons from Early Head Start](#)
- [Engaging Fathers video from Headstart](#)
- [Step by Step: Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families from Best Start Resource Centre, "Outline Potential Strategies" p.29, "Signs of Success" p.33, "Assess your Father-friendliness" p.17](#)



PROVIDE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION

Peer groups can help staff to strengthen relationships with dads and father figures and help them to feel more comfortable and included at WIC.

“If we are serious about providing boys and girls with nurturing male role models, we will have to provide venues where men who haven’t had everyday heroes in their childhoods and who are starved for guidance, for friendship, for brotherhood,” can acquire the “knowledge of how to be strong and male without being... aggressive and abusive.”

-Involving Men in Nurturing

Your WIC office may decide to have peer groups or a peer counseling program, especially for dads and father figures. These group opportunities foster peer learning, mentorship, and education on topics relevant to the fathers and father figures in your program.

Peer groups also provide time for staff to strengthen relationships with dads and father figures and learn more about their ideas, beliefs, and what is important to them as parents.



1. DESIGN PEER GROUPS THAT MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUR DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

Find out what dads and father figures want from a peer group and work to meet their needs. Some options to offer:

- Discussion/support sessions
- Child development concepts i.e. Baby Behavior and Toddler Behavior
- Nutrition and Breastfeeding topics
- Engage male facilitators or group facilitators who are skilled at working with men

Effective facilitation of dad’s groups includes:

- Relevant to dad’s and father figure’s interests and keeping tips practical
- Understand the diverse way individuals parent.
- Affirming dad or father figures parenting strengths or best efforts.
- Focus on open-ended questions, listening, and tips. Avoid giving advice.
- Having these conversations encourages learning new information and building on existing strengths.
- Incorporate culturally relevant activities into peer groups.

Offer relevant parenting topics of interest to dads and father figures.





2. ENCOURAGE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES TO GET INVOLVED WITH GROUPS OR INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION

After developing peer groups or a peer counseling program, WIC staff can:

- Recruit interested dads to mentor other dads.
- Use a buddy system that pairs more experienced parents with newer parents.
- Let men know the benefits of peer groups:
 - They can receive social support from dads and father figures who have experienced similar challenges.
 - Connecting them to one another can create a stronger sense of community.
 - It can be especially beneficial to those who do not have a supportive social network.
- Dads and father figures can get information and build their parenting skills in a nonjudgmental environment.
- Groups provide a safe, private space for them to talk about parenting
- Father-to-father mentoring supports bolstering parenting skills
- Use word of mouth. If dads or father figures are enjoying the group, suggest that they invite their friends or neighbors to join as well.



3. KEEPING DADS AND FATHER FIGURES INVOLVED IN PEER ACTIVITIES

To keep dads and father figures engaged, WIC staff can:

- Alternate class topics or formats each week or invite guest speakers from the community. Consider offering some kind of incentive or prize as motivation for dads and father figures to continue attending the group.
 - For example, T-shirts with a fatherhood logo or restaurant gift card upon completing a group series. Utilize community partners to develop incentives.
- Listen to feedback from dads and father figures and adjust the structure, content, and timing of group meetings accordingly.
- Maintain a connection with dads and father figures through social media, such as “dads’ board” for posting questions.

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Think about and discuss the needs of your WIC dads and father figures.
- Organize a peer group or individual education that meets those needs.
- Encourage dads and father figures to get involved with peer programs.
- Explain the benefits of peer groups and individual education.
- Use techniques to keep dads and father figures engaged and involved with the peer program.

Resources:

- [Birth to Five Engagement Guide, Family Partnerships \(Fathers' Groups, p.34\) from Head Start](#)
- [Creating Paths to Father Involvement: Lessons from Early Head Start](#)
- [Fathers in Sure Start from Sure Start \(UK\)](#)
- [Involving Men in Nurturing from Nurturing Parenting Program](#)
- [March DadNess: Engaging Fathers from the National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#)
- [Promoting Father Involvement in Early Childhood from FRIENDS National Resource Center](#)
- [Recurso para Las Manos de Apá por Headstart](#)



PROVIDE SERVICE REFERRALS TO DADS AND FATHER FIGURES AND BUILD COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Programs that successfully include dads and father figures focus on them as people, not just in their role as fathers. They provide support, referrals, and resources.

“Effective referrals begin with effective, trusting relationships between programs and parents. Get to know the fathers’ strengths, the diversity of their needs, and the tough challenges they face. These relationships and this knowledge drive the referral process.”

-Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide, Effective Referrals

1. DEVELOPING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Invite current or potential partners to visit your program during an event.
 - Elaborate on how your WIC office is involving and assisting parents; to support dads and father figures their significance in children’s lives.
 - This can strengthen the relationship with current partners.
- You can also use community partners, like community centers and local businesses, to spread the word that your WIC program is reaching out more to dads and father figures and publicizing special events.
- Offer dads or father figures the same referral materials you would provide mothers such as the CDPH handout Ask WIC for Referrals and any community referrals you partner with.

2. MAKING THE MOST OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO INCLUDE DADS AND FATHER FIGURES

If you develop community partnerships, you may have more capacity for activities that will appeal to dads and father figures, such as:

- Special story time for dads, father figures, and their children at the local library
- Gym time at kid’s gym or “Daddy and Me” time at a community pool
- Invite physical trainers to have a fitness clinic to encourage parents to be active with their kids at home
- Sponsorship for a BBQ at a local park with playground time or soccer
- Invite community partners to participate in a Father’s Day Fair!

The following quote is an example of how an agency used community partnerships to celebrate dads and father figures:

“Community Action Agency (Jackson, MI) held a community festival called “Father’s Fair” near Father’s Day to raise awareness of the importance of fathers and to give families an opportunity to celebrate fathers. Local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and churches, as well as the Jackson Police Department and the Friend of the Court, organized informational booths. The children played on an inflatable obstacle course, slide, and ball room.”

-from Dedicated to Dads: Lessons from Early Head Start





3. SUPPORT DADS AND FATHER FIGURES WITH REFERRALS TO COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

WIC staff can learn about social and educational resources for men in the community. Your clinic may already have information on many of these places as part of your referral process for women and children.

STEPS FOR MAKING EFFECTIVE REFERRALS

1. Before referring dads and father figures to an agency, know the agency's process and how they will be treated.
2. Briefly prepare dads and father figures with highlights of what to expect.
3. Check back with dads and father figures about whether and if referrals are helpful.
4. If the referral was less helpful, work with dads and father figures to understand the roadblocks they may have encountered.

5. If the referral was helpful, ask dads and father figures to share their referral experience with other families.

Adapted from Community Partnerships: Effective Referrals

After making the referral, WIC staff can help motivate dads and father figures to follow through on referrals and make sure the connection has been made.

- Focus on health and health services.
- Remind dads and father figures that they need to take good care of themselves to be able to take care of their children and family.



POTENTIAL COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

HEALTH SERVICES:

- Local health and human services departments
- Community clinics
- City and county hospitals
- University hospitals

SUPPORT FOR POSITIVE CO-PARENTING:

- Mediation service providers
- Marriage and family services
- Family rights organizations
- Legal aid societies
- Anger management counselors

MENTAL HEALTH:

- Community mental health providers
- school-based mental health clinics (for younger men)
- Substance abuse programs
- Family violence programs
- Hospital emergency departments (short term solution)

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT:

- English as a Second Language classes (ESL) or GED classes (may be offered at community centers or libraries)
- Community colleges
- Technical schools
- Employment agencies
- Career centers

HOUSING:

- Community development agencies
- Housing authorities
- Public housing
- Community development financial institutions
- Halfway houses and shelters

SOCIAL SUPPORT:

- YMCA/YWCA
- Community centers
- Faith Institutions
- Neighborhood groups
- Parent-teacher associations
- Community improvement groups

TIPS FOR WIC STAFF:

- Develop or strengthen community partnerships.
- Use community partnerships to reach out to dads and father figures more.
- Provide referrals to dads and father figures for issues outside of parenting and use partnerships to inform the referral process.
- Make sure dad's and father figure's needs are considered and check back with them to identify if the referrals were effective.

Resources:

- [Program Strategies to Maximize Fathers' Connections with Community Partners, Birth to Five Father Engagement Guide from Head Start](#)
- [Father's Search for Resources in His Community from FRIENDS National Resource Center](#)



Engaging Dads and Father Figures at WIC

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