

# Reimagining the Fatherhood Narrative: Why Kids Depend on It

The Washington Interagency Fatherhood Council

Issue Brief | August 2020

## What do we know?

We all have our own ideas of what fatherhood is and who a father should be, whether positive, negative, neutral, or dynamic and evolving. Shaped by personal experience and culture, a father's role is unscripted and unique. Often, a father's view of parenting as he experienced it as a child will impact his role as a parent.<sup>1</sup> This influences how fathers interact with and raise their children, and the attributes children internalize and exhibit as adults and future parents.

**“I realized it was more than just providing, being able to put a roof over their head and put name-brand shoes on their feet. It was actually being a mentor and being an example.”**

A father or father figure's role in a child's life from birth is critical for development, health, and life outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Research also shows there are shared traits among fathers,<sup>3</sup> which have helped shape widely-held stereotypes about and expectations of fathers.<sup>4</sup> Dad as the financial provider or breadwinner has been shown to be the most dominant stereotype across diverse racial and ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> This and the disciplinarian and emotional stoic stereotypes have at times come as a detriment,<sup>3</sup> especially for young people as they grow into adulthood. Furthermore, social and masculine norms have framed perspectives of the father figure.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that fathers who stick closely to extreme masculine norms (e.g. lack sensitivity, show no emotion) are less involved in “instrumental and expressive parenting” than fathers who align less with these traits.<sup>3</sup> Today, however, we see a shift from negative masculine norms that have tethered some fathers to their identities. Many engage more intentionally with their children and embrace more fully the role of nurturer, caregiver, and emotional supporter.<sup>3</sup> This “caring masculinity” leads to happier, healthier children who exhibit fewer behavioral problems, do better in school, and achieve greater overall well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Children with fathers who are nurturing and engaged achieve better life outcomes<sup>3</sup>



Overall health



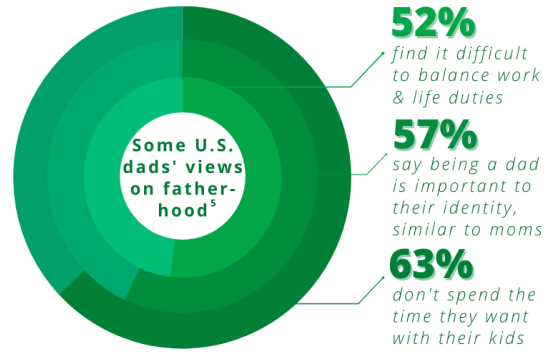
Academic success



Engaged as parents

Traditional family structures have shifted over the past several decades as fathers engage in more child caregiving.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Yet, fatherhood inclusive practice and perspective remains limited: policies and programs perpetuate stereotypes of a father's role, namely that of the financial provider.<sup>1</sup> Fathers face increased “sociocultural pressure” to be involved in caregiving

and pushback from workplaces for trying to do so, such as through taking paternity leave.<sup>3</sup> Reimagining the fatherhood narrative will require shedding fatherhood stigmas and adopting what is true today: fathers are capable, eager to share parental duties, and are more engaged than has ever before been recorded.<sup>5,6,7</sup>



## What is the Washington story?

As we gather Washington fathers' stories, we know many of them are breaking down the stereotypes that exist. After having his own children, one dad reflected in an interview, “I realized it was more than just providing, being able to put a roof over their head and put name-brand shoes on their feet. It was actually being a mentor and being an example.” A young father has risen to the challenge of single-parenthood, taking on the role of nurturer, caregiver, provider, teacher, disciplinarian, and playmate. He said, “I think that's one of the most challenging things, trying to wear all of these different hats and try to make a balance of my own life and be a mom, a dad,” all while growing himself.

## Where do we go from here?

The traditional family structure is diversifying and with it the parenthood experience.<sup>1</sup> This is critical insight as we learn how to better serve the dynamic role that fathers play.

### ◀Begin at home

Encourage healthy emotional coping and expression in children, actively engage in meaningful activities, and share parenting responsibilities equally.<sup>6</sup>

### ◀Adapt to changing norms

Programs and policies must reflect the present, complex needs of families.<sup>1,3,8</sup> Policies must support fathers' increased involvement in their children's lives,<sup>1</sup> such as through increased paternity leave and support networks.

### ◀Promote fatherhood inclusion

As fathers challenge stereotypes, we must adopt a fatherhood inclusive mindset, such as involving dads in child health, marketing that expresses fathers' views and roles,<sup>7</sup> and program curriculum that includes a fatherhood focus and supports dads in child caregiving roles.<sup>8</sup>

## References

1. Valiquette-Tessier, S., Gosselin, J., Young, M., & Thomassin, K. (2019). A literature review of cultural stereotypes associated with motherhood and fatherhood. *Marriage and Family Review*, 55(4), 299-329. doi:10.1080/01494929.2018.1469567
2. National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI). (2019.) *Father Facts (8th, ed.)*. Philadelphia, PA: Author. PDF
3. Petts, R. J., Shafer, K. M., & Essig, L. (2018). Does adherence to masculine norms shape fathering behavior? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 80(3), 704-720. doi:10.1111/jomf.12476
4. Banchevsky, S., & Park, B. (2016). The "New Father": Dynamic Stereotypes of Fathers. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 17(1), 103–107. <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/10.1037/a0038945>
5. Livingston, G. and Parker, K. (2019). *8 facts about American dads*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/fathers-day-facts/>
6. Kirsch, J. (2019). *The Science of How Dads and Father Figures Help Kids*. Fatherly. Retrieved from <https://www.fatherly.com/health-science/science-benefits-of-fatherhood-dads-father-effect/>
7. Jezard, A. (2018, January). *Millennial fathers are rejecting the 'bad dad' stereotypes*. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/millennial-fathers-are-rejecting-on-screen-dad-stereotypes-research-finds/>
8. Panter-Brick, C., Burgess, A., Eggerman, M., McAllister, F., Pruett, K., & Leckman, J. F. (2014). Practitioner review: Engaging fathers - recommendations for a game change in parenting interventions based on a systematic review of the global evidence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(11), 1187-1212. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12280

# Reimagining the Fatherhood Narrative Infographic

## More than a breadwinner Reshaping the fatherhood narrative

There are a lot of stereotypes about dads. We know that dads are dynamic and essential.

**2 million**

dads are primary caregivers in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

Dads spend

**3X**

the amount of time caregiving for their children compared to 50 years ago<sup>2</sup>



Capable

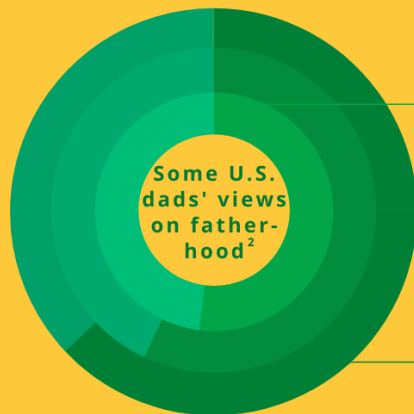
Sensitive

Caring

Wise

Strong

Nurturing



**52%**

find it difficult to balance work / life duties

**57%**

say being a dad is important to their identity, similar to moms

**63%**

don't spend the time they want with their kids

Children with fathers who are nurturing and engaged achieve better life outcomes<sup>3</sup>



Overall health



Academic success



Engaged as parents

<sup>1</sup> Valkette-Tessier, S., Gosselin, J., Young, M., & Thomason, K. (2019). A literature review of cultural stereotypes associated with motherhood and fatherhood. *Marriage and Family Review*, 55(4), 295-325. doi:10.1080/01492025.2018.1469567

<sup>2</sup> Livingston, G. and Parker, K. (2019). *8 facts about American dads*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/fathers-day-facts/>

<sup>3</sup> National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI). (2019.) *Father Facts* (8th, ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Author. PDF