

THE ORDINARY IMPORTANCE OF THE FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Nicholas Kasovac, MA, R-DMT, IMH-E, OTS

Nucha Isarowong, PhD, LCSW

3rd Annual Washington Fatherhood Summit | March 16, 2021

Poll: US Culture/Society on “Fathers”

*Three (3) words that you think
US culture/society would use to describe “Fathers”.*

DIVERSITY-INFORMED TENETS FOR WORK WITH INFANTS, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

1. Self-Awareness Leads to Better Services for Families
2. Champion Children's Rights Globally
3. Work to Acknowledge Privilege and Combat Discrimination
4. Recognize and Respect Non-Dominant Bodies of Knowledge
5. Honor Diverse Family Structures
6. Understand That Language Can Hurt or Heal
7. Support Families in Their Preferred Language
8. Allocate Resources to Systems Change
9. Make Space and Open Pathways
10. Advance Policy That Supports All Families

From: <https://diversityinformedtenets.org/>

The LEGO® Principle

“Why is Lego
the most
ingenious toy
in the world?”

(p. 42, *Sophie's World*
by Jostein Gaarder)



“What is the most
important
characteristic of
the Lego?”

(from *The DAD Projects*,
Nicholas Kasovac)

Importance of the Father-Child Relationship

1. It underlies all the domains of development (social-emotional, gross motor, fine motor, language, cognitive)
2. It's the precursor to physical and mental health throughout the entire lifespan (ACE Study)
3. It's the most important protective factor to develop RESILIENCY as a skill
4. This relationship will be the basis for every relationship for the rest of the child's life





Key Points for Providers and Fathers

*This presentation will
reference these processes:*

- Parallel Process
- Reflective Functioning

Ghosts in the Nursery

Ghosts in the Nursery – <http://www.imh4pnp.com/Ghosts-in-the-Nursery.html>

Ghosts in the nursery is apt descriptor for the "emotional baggage" vulnerabilities parents (and other caregivers) may carry from their own experiences of being parented including conflicted feelings about their parents, a sense of being unsupported in childhood, and traumatizing memories. These ghosts often negatively impact feeding, sleep, toilet training, discipline, and other areas of current parenting abilities by influencing the way parents interpret their infants behavior. Parents with histories of child abuse may find certain aspects of appropriate early childhood development as purposeful acts of threat and aggression.

Ghosts in the Nursery

(Parallel Process)

*Ghosts in the nursery is apt descriptor for the "emotional baggage" vulnerabilities **providers** (and other **professionals**) may carry from their own experiences of being parented including conflicted feelings about their parents, a sense of being unsupported in childhood, and traumatizing memories. These ghosts often negatively impact **interaction, communication, non-judgment, collaboration, empathy**, and other areas of current **skilled** abilities by influencing the way **providers** interpret their **client's** behavior. **Providers** with histories of child abuse **[and/or less than adequate parenting]** may find certain aspects of appropriate **parenting practices** as purposeful acts of threat and aggression **[or possibly negligence and resistance]**.*

Poll: Your Perspective on “Fathers”

*Three (3) words that
you personally would use to describe “Fathers”.*

Mother Involvement

The general term ***mother involvement*** has been used to encompass the many ways that mothers participate in child rearing. This term has become particularly relevant for policy and programmatic efforts describing the various ways that nonresidential, low-income mothers maintain connections with their children that are presumed to be beneficial to the child. Financial contribution has long been, and still is, a central aspect of mother involvement, but many have argued for a definition of involvement that gives attention to the role mothers play in other domains, especially caregiving and decision making.

Domain-Specific Trajectories of Involvement Among Fathers of Children Born to Young, Low-Income, African American Mothers

“The general term *father involvement* has been used to encompass the many ways that fathers participate in child rearing (Lamb, 2000). This term has become particularly relevant for policy and programmatic efforts describing the various ways that nonresidential, low-income fathers maintain connections with their children that are presumed to be beneficial to the child (Mincy & Dupree, 2001). Financial contribution has long been, and still is, a central aspect of father involvement, but many have argued for a definition of involvement that gives attention to the role fathers play in other domains, especially caregiving and decision making (Krishnakumar & Black, 2003; Lamb, 2000).” (p. 130)

“...the study relies exclusively on maternal reports of fathers’ involvement.” (p. 141)
- (Thullen et al, 2012)

Father Involvement

- **Stop using this term!**
- What do we really mean by that phrase?
- It implies *temporary* or *incidental* engagement
- What about the relationship between father and child?
- Can we just call it “fathering?”

The Father’s Role starts at a deficit...



Mothering and Fathering

To Mother - (transitive verb):

1. take care of somebody with tenderness
- To look after somebody with great care and affection, sometimes to an excessive degree

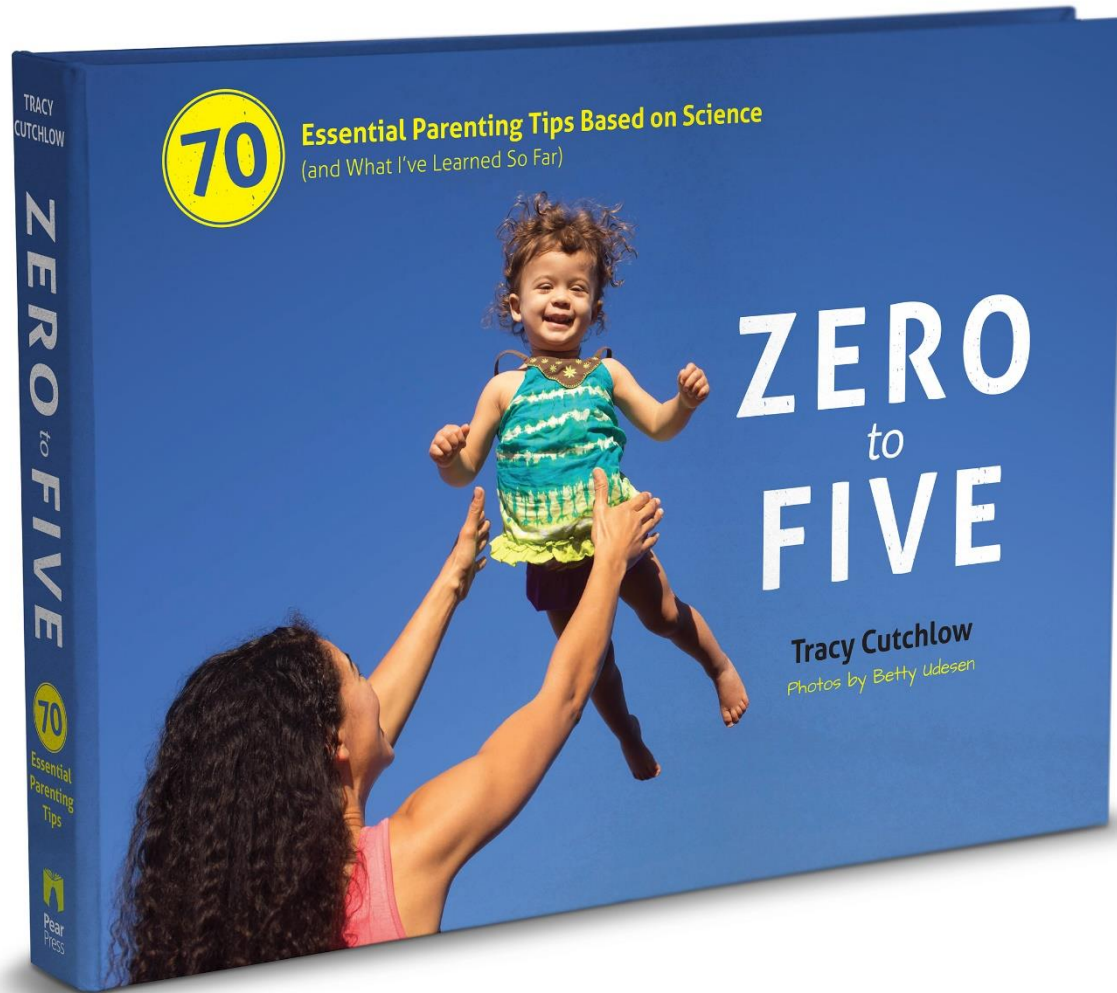
To Father - (transitive verb):

1. become father of offspring
- To cause a woman or female animal to produce offspring

Examples of “Potential” Father Exclusion / Father-Child Disruption

- Prenatal
- Labor & Delivery
- Couplet Care/Postpartum
- Breastfeeding Support
- Postpartum Follow Up
- Infant/Parent/Family Research
- Professional Articles/Research
- Pediatrics
- Early Childhood Organizations
- Programs
- Agencies
- Family Mental Health (Perinatal Mood Disorders)
- Policies
- Peers
- Work
- Government
- Maternal Gatekeeping
- Grandmothers
- Refusal of Visitation (especially Teens)
- Artwork/Photography
- Print Media
- Social Media

Examples



Page 18
Chores – first
pic of Dad



Page 32
First pic with
Dad & Infant

Butterfly Effect

“....the concept that small causes can have large effects.”



Changing one thing.....can change everything.

Fathers are different than mothers

Most fathers....

- Identify with role of “protector” and “provider”
- Turn their babies outward and introduce them to the world
- Prepare their babies to take risks, explore, discover and venture away from secure base
- Assist with “emotional regulation”
- Teach their children rules and socialization
- Instill inherent value in their child, like cutting and polishing a diamond, preparing to present them to the world



Communication Style.....

Paternal Style *(not gender specific)*

- Efficiency-oriented
- Use “bullet points” to share information
- Avoid comments that portray incompetence
- Recognize and appreciate abilities/strengths
- Ask “what do you think?” (NOT “what do you feel?”)
- Task-oriented – Usually pathway to relationship
- “Report” (men) versus “Rapport” (women)
- Typically side by side (men) versus en face (women)
- Talk “through” something to Fathers (Ex: car engine)

Adapted from “He Said, She Said” by Neil Tift

Fathering Role

- Establish, nurture and maintain a mutually engaging and meaningful relationship with your child
- Respond and provide to your child's basic needs (eat, sleep, safety, hygiene, development) consistently, predictably, reliably
- Discuss and execute equitable agreements with child's mother
- Allow yourself to grow, change, and transform along with your child



Father's brain is sensitive to childcare experiences

PC Fathers' Brains changed because of "primary caregiving"

"Primary-caregiving fathers exhibited high amygdala activation similar to primary-caregiving mothers, alongside high activation of superior temporal sulcus (STS) comparable to secondary-caregiving fathers, and functional connectivity between amygdala and STS. *Among all fathers, time spent in direct childcare was linked with the degree of amygdala-STS connectivity.*"

(Abraham et al, 2014)

For Fathers/Fathering, let's consider this priority order

1. Meaning – the relationship with his infant is meaningful, and....
 - The baby's birth is a life-changing event for him
 - He has a new “human” for which he is responsible, and not just financially
 - Often a depth of feelings are stirred within him that he has never experienced before
2. Function – with newfound meaning in his life...
 - He has a new role to execute, often learning new skills (eg, baby care)
 - His existence and purpose in the world has changed and/or expanded
 - His priorities are different, often new, while others have been diminished or eliminated
3. Form –he will be a different person
 - He will be more responsible for his child
 - His values will shift and possibly change
 - He will have a new perspective about what he contributes to the world

Father Question



Is this best for my child.....

.....or convenient for me?

Provider Question

*Is this best for the
father-child relationship...*

...or convenient for me?



What will you do
to promote the
father-child relationship?



Thank you!

Nicholas Kasovac, MA, R-DMT, IMH-E, OTS

The DAD Projects (Dads & Development)

www.TheDadProjects.com

TheDadProjects@gmail.com

Poll: Barriers to Father Engagement

What obstacles have you experienced or can think of that deters or prevents fathers from engaging in services for and with their children?

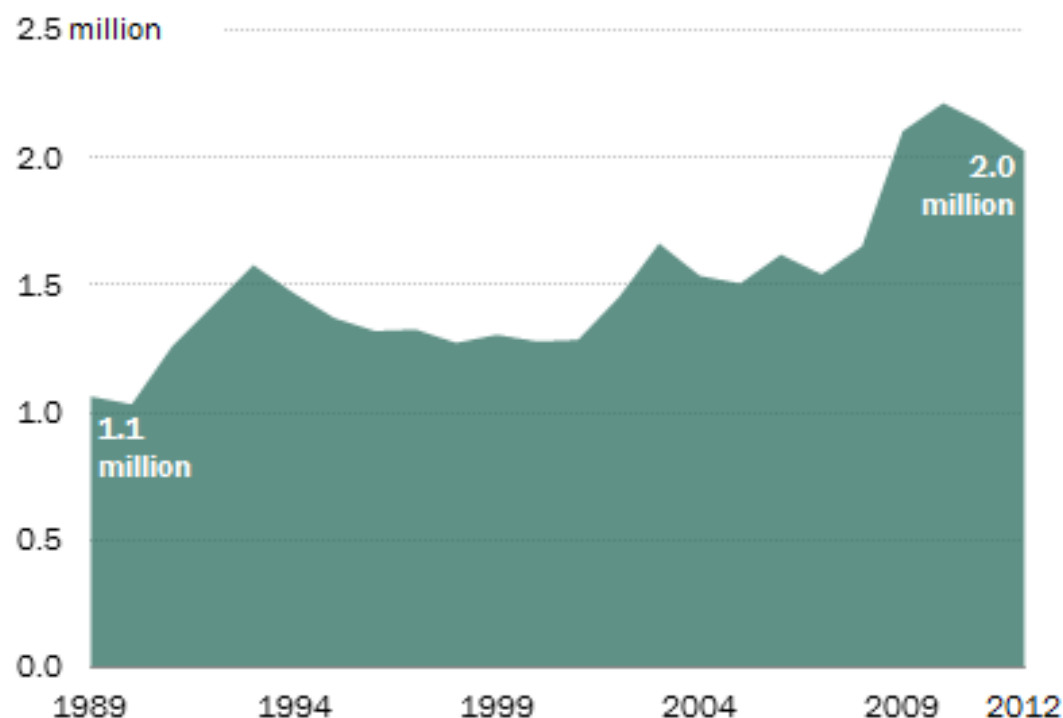
How can we all support the father-child relationship?

Fathers and Fatherhood

- The 2010 U.S. Census reports that 32% of married fathers (**approximately 7 million dads**) are “a regular source of care for their children under age 15, up from 26% from 2002.”

Rising Number of Stay-at-Home Dads

Number of fathers living with child(ren) younger than 18 who do not work outside the home



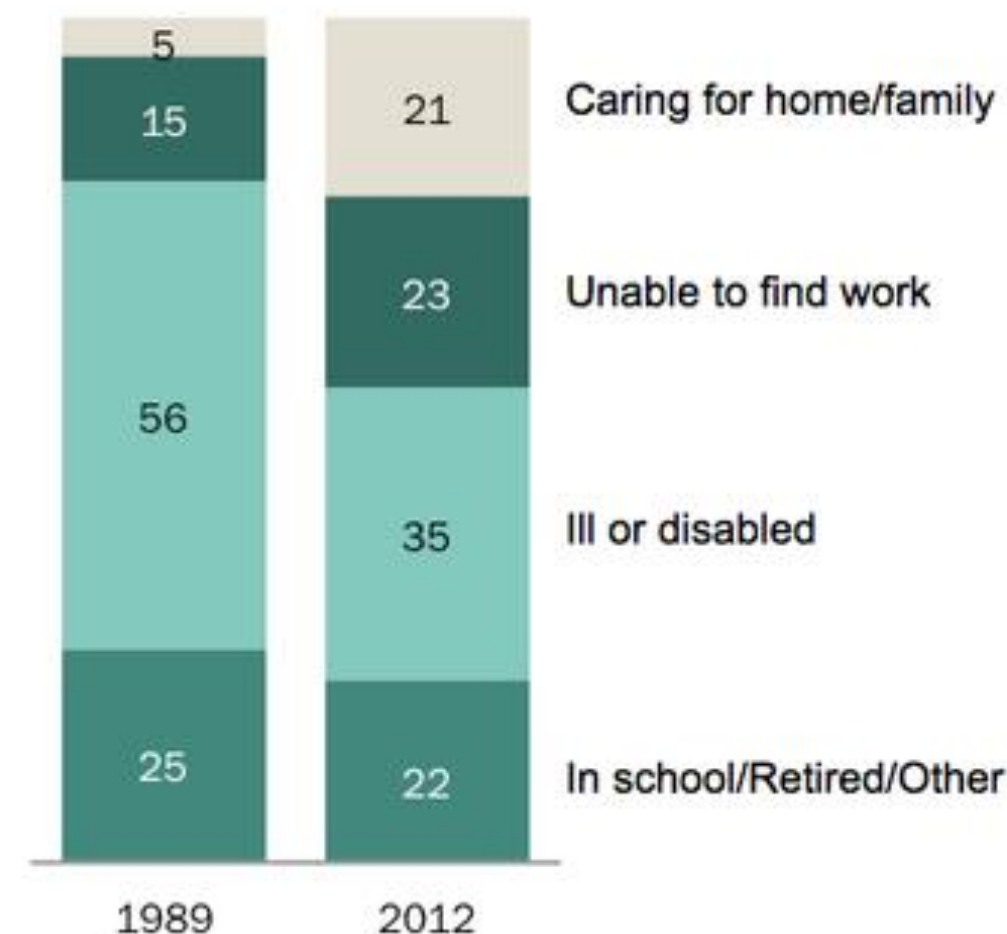
Note: Based on fathers ages 18-69 with own child(ren) younger than 18 in the household. Fathers who live apart from their children are not included. Fathers are categorized based on employment status in the year prior to the survey.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of March Current Population Surveys Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-CPS), 1990-2013

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Growth in Stay-at-Home Fathers Driven by Those Caring for Family and Those Unable to Find Work

% of stay-at-home fathers who say they are not working because they are ...





Despite the evidence and shifting roles and responsibilities, reminders that fathers are parents remain necessary.



Quick Illustration

- National HeadStart Biennial Report 2015
 - Served 1,007,800 families in 2,935 programs
 - 234,000 children from ~2400 programs (82.9%) had fathers participate in organized, regularly scheduled activities designed to engaged with fathers
 - ~23% if we assume one father per child

Workforce Development Hypotheses

Why were child-family services not engaging with fathers in services for and with their children?

- Home visitors did not know how to engage with fathers
- Home visitors not aware of the influence of fathering on children's development prenatally and beyond
- Social-cultural beliefs about the roles of men and fathers
 - Home visitors may have beliefs about and/or histories with men, fathers, and fathering that may get in the way
- Intersection of race, class, and fatherhood

Home Visiting National Profile 2018



3,211,335

home visits provided



286,108

families served



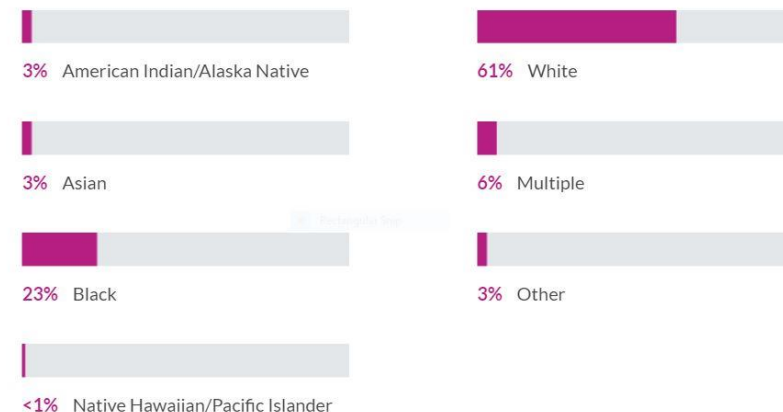
312,635

children served

National Home Visiting Resource Center. (2019). *2019 Home Visiting Yearbook*. Arlington, VA: James Bell Associates and the Urban Institute.

<https://nhvrc.org/yearbook/2019-yearbook/>

Race



Ethnicity



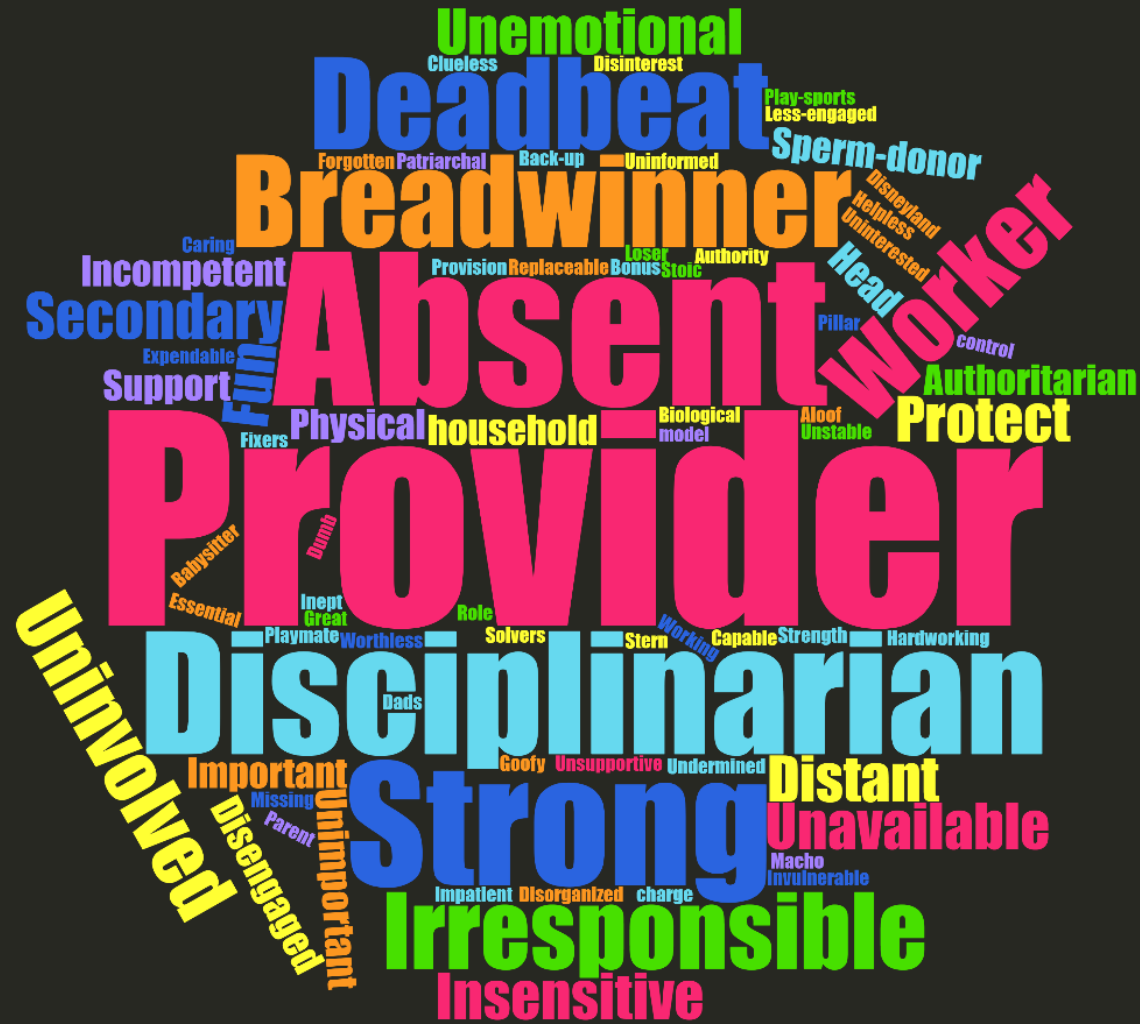
Caregiver education



Perceptions of Fathers

- *Three (3) words that you think **US culture/society** would use to describe “Fathers”.*
- *Three (3) words that **you personally** would use to describe “Fathers”.*

Culture/Society



Personal






THE LONGER YOU SWIM
IN A CULTURE, THE MORE
INVISIBLE IT BECOMES

<https://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>

Barriers to Father Engagement

- *What obstacles have you experienced or can think of that deters or prevents fathers from engaging in services for and with their children?*

A night scene featuring a closed, ornate metal gate. A path leads through the gate, illuminated by a warm, golden light source, possibly a lamp or fire, creating a strong glow and long shadows. The gate is flanked by dense foliage and trees. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somewhat somber.

*Anyone or anything with the power
to deter or prevent fathers from engaging
in services for and with their children.*

Gatekeeper

Barriers to Father Engagement

Society/Culture

Professionals/Organizations

Mothers

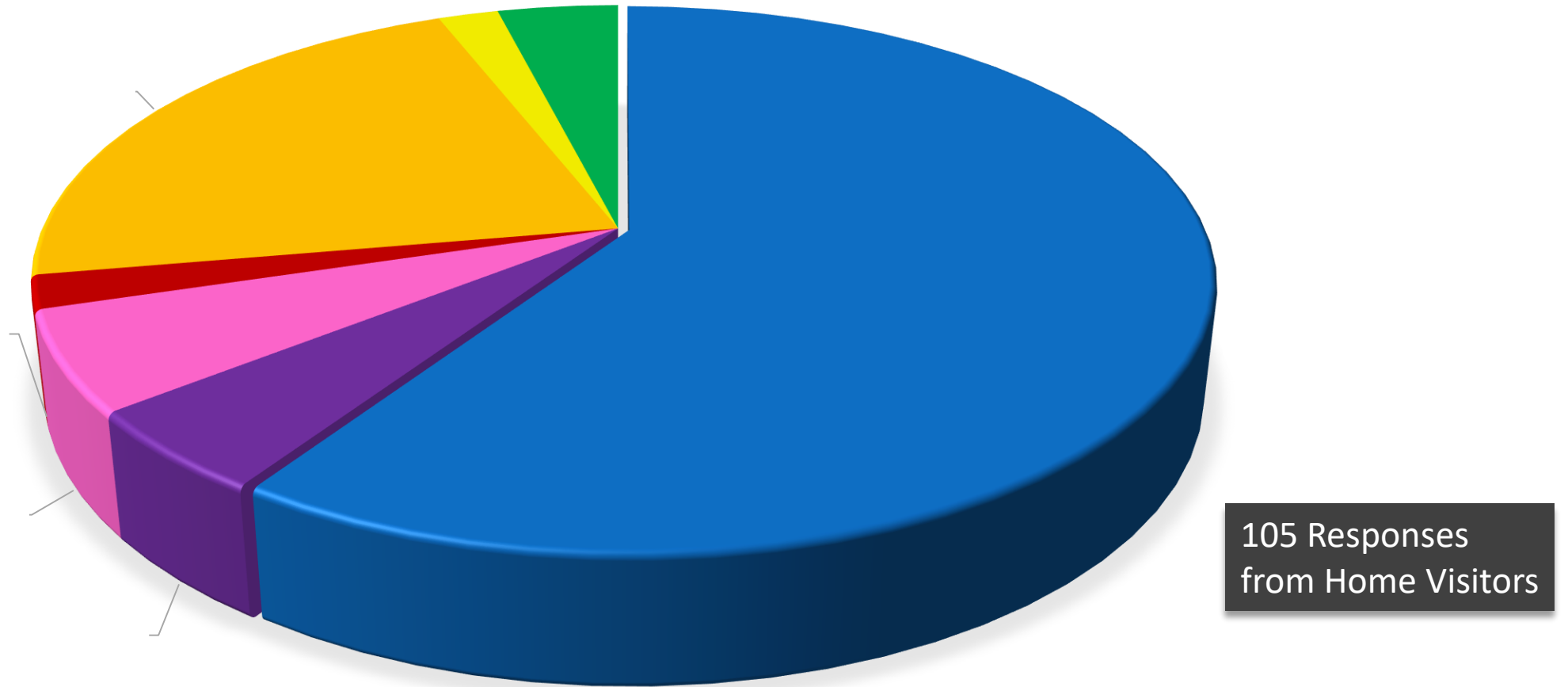
Mother-Father Relationships

Laws/Policies

Grandparents

Fathers

Sources of Obstacles to Father Engagement



Lessons Learned: Provider Level

- Complex concerns around parent/home visitor dynamics:
 - Female home visitors worried about perceived intimacy (from mothers)
 - Female home visitors experience fear/anxiety around engaging men
 - Male HV/father “intimidation”

Lessons Learned: Institutional Level

- Agencies appear to be rigorously examining the risks related to hiring male home visitors
 - Concerns around male home visitors visiting mothers (liabilities)
 - Systems hold assumptions about fathers and father engagement
 - Systems hold assumptions around male home visitors

Lessons Learned: Fathers

- Fathers are perceived as their own “gatekeepers”
 - Self identify as lazy, uninterested, uncaring, etc.
 - Personal history with their own fathers
 - Beliefs about roles
 - Beliefs about services
 - Fathers choose work
 - Incarceration
 - Substance use or abuse

Lessons Learned

- Deeply-rooted stereotypes and bias around fathers, fatherhood, and father engagement exist in and across all communities
- Home visitors want to engage more fathers, but perceive tremendous barriers
- Engaging fathers is important but not yet **essential**

Tenet #1

Self-awareness Leads to Better Services for Families

Working with infants, children, and families requires all individuals, organizations, and systems of care to reflect on our own culture, values and beliefs, and on the impact that racism, classism, sexism, able-ism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression have had on our lives in order to provide diversity-informed, culturally attuned services.



Tenet #2

Champion Children's Rights Globally

Tenet #3

Work to Acknowledge Privilege and Combat Discrimination

Tenet #4

Recognize and Respect Non-Dominant Bodies of Knowledge

Infants and children are citizens of the world. The global community is responsible for supporting parent/caregivers, families, and local communities in welcoming, protecting and nurturing them and children in their care. Privilege constitutes injustice. Diversity-informed practitioners acknowledge privilege where we hold it, and use it strategically and responsibly. We combat racism, classism, sexism, able-ism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression with ourselves, recognize, and honor many ways of knowing, bodies of knowledge, sources of strength, and routes to healing within all families and communities.



Tenet #5

Honor Diverse Family Structures

Families decide who is included and how they are structured; no particular family constellation or organization is inherently optimal compared to any other. Diversity-informed practice recognizes and strives to counter the historical bias toward idealizing (and conversely blaming) biological mothers while overlooking the critical child-rearing contributions of other parents and caregivers including second mothers, fathers, kin and felt family, adoptive parents, foster parents, and early care and educational providers.

Tenet #6

Understand that Language Can Hurt or Heal

Diversity-informed practice recognizes the power of language to divide or connect, denigrate or celebrate, hurt or heal. We strive to use language (including body language, imagery, and other modes of nonverbal communication) in ways that most inclusively support all children and their families, caregivers, and communities.

Tenet #7

Support Families in Their Preferred Language

Families are best supported in facilitating infants' and children's development and mental health when services are available in their native languages.

Tenet #8

Allocate Resources to Systems Change

Tenet #9

Make Space and Open Pathways

Diversity and inclusion must be proactively considered when doing any work with or on behalf of infants, children, and families. Resource allocation includes time, money, additional/alternative practices, and other supports and accommodations, otherwise systems of oppression may be inadvertently reproduced. Individuals, organizations, and systems of care need ongoing opportunities for reflection in order to identify implicit bias, remove barriers, and work to eliminate the root causes of disparity and inequity. Infant, child, and family serving workforces are most dynamic and effective when historically and currently marginalized individuals and groups have equitable access to a wide range of roles, disciplines, and modes of practice and influence.

Courtesy of Alameda County Fathers Corps Digital Photo Bank



Tenet #10

Advance Policy that Supports All Families

Diversity-informed practitioners consider the impact of policy and legislation on all people and advance a just and equitable policy agenda for and with families.

Washington Paid Family & Medical Leave Program

- FT, PT, and Seasonal work count
- Family Leave – Up to 12 weeks
 - Children (biological, adopted, foster or stepchild)
 - Grandchildren
- Use little at a time or all at once

Learn more:

<https://paidleave.wa.gov/>

Thank you!

Nucha Isarowong, PhD, LCSW

Barnard Center for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

<https://barnardcenter.nursing.uw.edu/>

nucha@uw.edu

Nicholas Kasovac, MA, R-DMT, IMH-E, OTS

The DAD Projects (Dads & Development)

www.TheDadProjects.com

TheDadProjects@gmail.com