

**June 7, 2024**

***2024 Fatherhood Summit***

**“Counting Fathers Because Kids Matter”**

# **Nurturing Connection for Fathers, Families, and Communities**



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Founder, Nurture Connection

# Learning objectives

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- To reflect on your **current mindset** about important role of fathers in the development of well-being and flourishing for next generation children and families
- To consider opportunities for **expanding practices and other disruptive system changes** that will advance father engagement and Early Relational Health (ERH)
- To **become an advocate in WA** for father engagement in all early childhood system programs, services and initiatives



 ZERO  
TO  
THREE

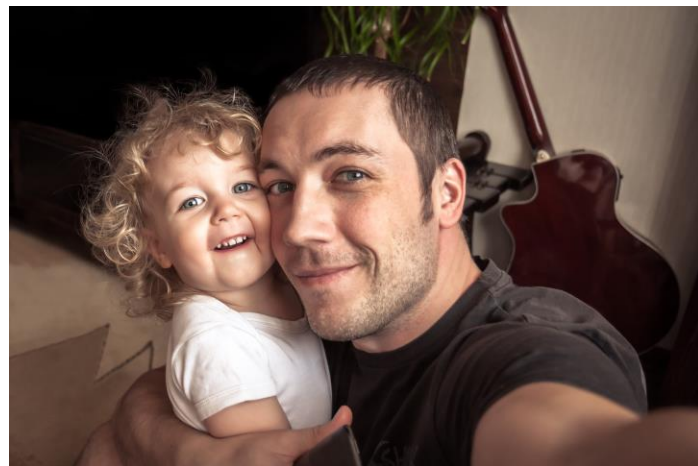
# Key Elements for Child Development

- Early experiences in life build “brain architecture”
- Genes and environments together interact to shape the architecture of the brain
- Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined
- “Toxic stress” and adverse experiences derail healthy child development
- Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time
- Children develop in an **environment of relationships**



# Father Involvement in Families

- Fathers represent 2/3rds of the U.S. male population (72.2M)
- 82% of father's live with at least one biological child
- Father involvement is linked to:
  - Earlier prenatal care initiative
  - Higher utilization of postnatal care services
  - Longer breastfeeding duration
  - Lower levels of maternal depression
  - Improved child development
  - Improved father's health



PRAMS for Dads  
C. Garfield

# The Evolving Understanding of Fatherhood

- Since the dawn of civilization, fathers have contributed to a child's endurance, longevity, and prosperity
- Fathers promote children's adaptation to social rules, codes of conduct, cultural and religious meaning systems, an outward view to the wider world, and the teaching of daily living skills
- Until recently, fathers were the major contributor to the material background within which children developed.
- Fathering is a much less biologically-determined phenomenon than mothering and its expression assumes a wide phenotypic style
- Major shifts in role of the father in childcare responsibilities, changing traditional family roles, and the growing centrality of parenting in men's lives
- While research lags on the biological basis of paternal caregiving, neuroscience of fatherhood development, the balance between maternal and paternal relative and sequential, if at all, contributions to child development over time children.

*Feldman, R. (2023). Father contribution to human resilience. Development and Psychopathology, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579423000354>*

# Early Relational Health

Not a new concept, but a new term

ERH builds upon decades of research from the fields of:  
Child development  
Infant mental health  
Neurodevelopment





**Early Relational Health (ERH)** focuses on the importance of early relationships and experiences in healthy development across a child's lifetime.

## Definition

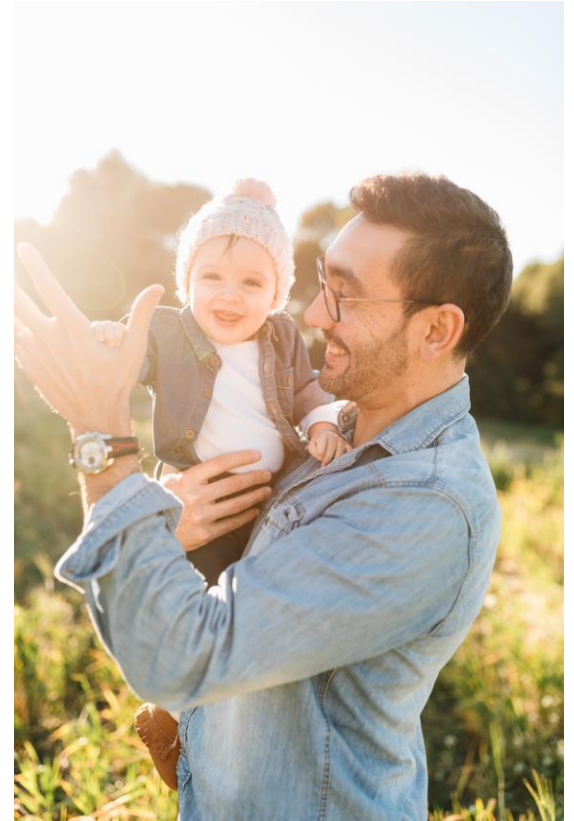
And, by definition, **ERH** is the state of emotional well-being that grows from the positive emotional connection between babies and toddlers and their parent/caregivers supported by strong, positive and nurturing experiences.



## Early Relational Health

# Foundational early relationships shape the well-being of both the child and the caregiver

- The **two-way nature** of early relationships affects two-generational health and well-being in the moment and long term.
- When we focus on this foundation and support the contexts around these relationships, **children and their caregivers thrive**—now and into the future.

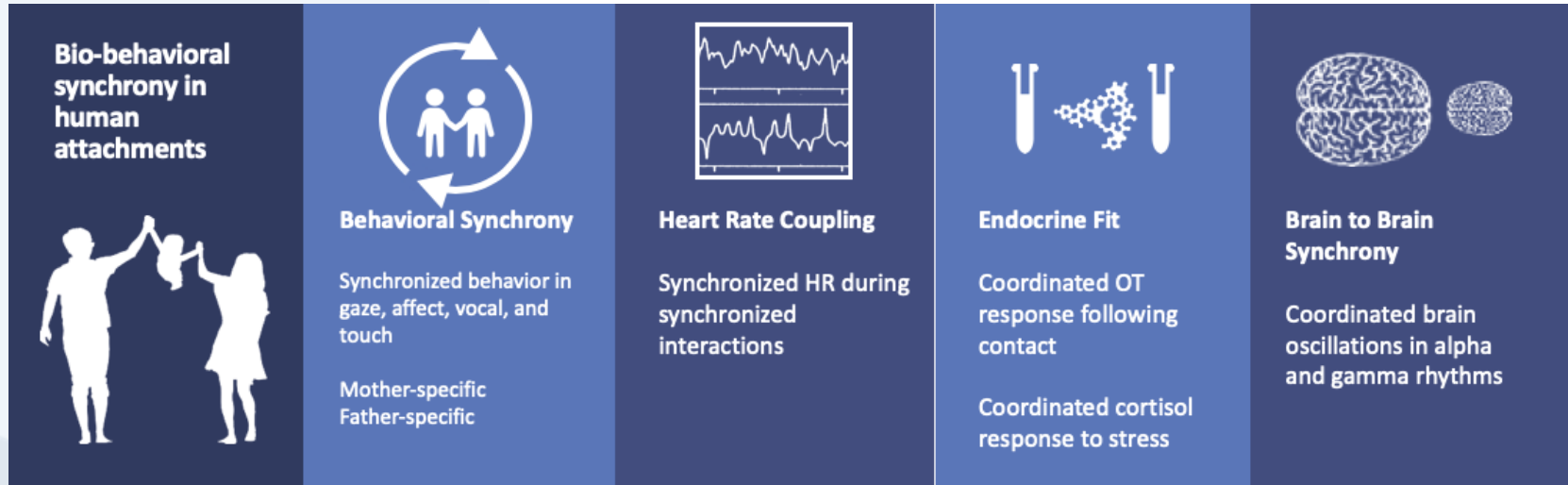


# Early Relational Health





# Bio-behavioral synchrony and dyadic neurodevelopment





*“Synchronous caregiving  
from birth to adulthood  
tunes humans' social brain”*

Ulmer Yaniv, et al, PNAS, 118:14, 2021

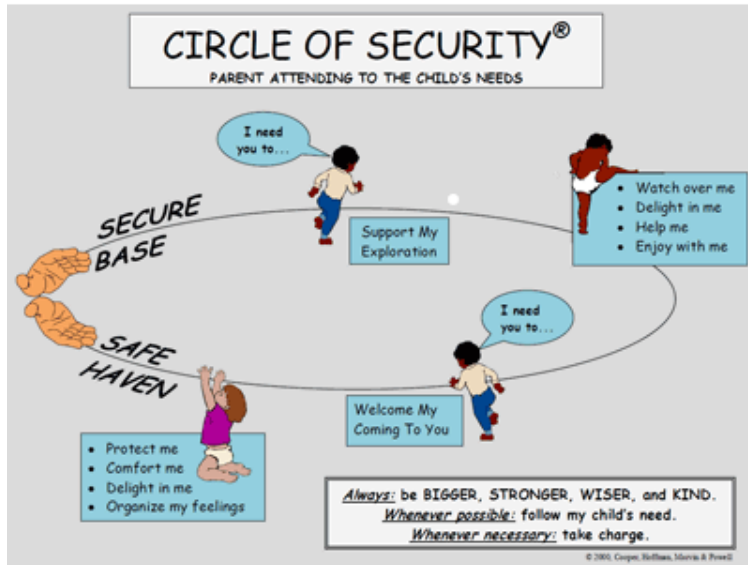


*And social-emotional  
development is one  
outcome of early relational  
health*



# Additional Principles within the Framework of Early Relational Health

## Separation and Reunion



Circle of Security Program

## Rupture and Repair



Gold, C, and Tronick, E. (2020). *The Power of Discord: Why the Ups and Downs of Relationships are the Secret to Building Intimacy, Resilience, and Trust*, Little Brown and Spark, **ISBN-10** : 0316488879



## **THE POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTIONS:**

**”Its all about the relationships”**





## Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World

**Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, 2020**

*“Social connection stands out as a largely unrecognized and underappreciated force for addressing many of the critical problems we’re dealing with, both as individuals and as a society”*



# About Nurture Connection

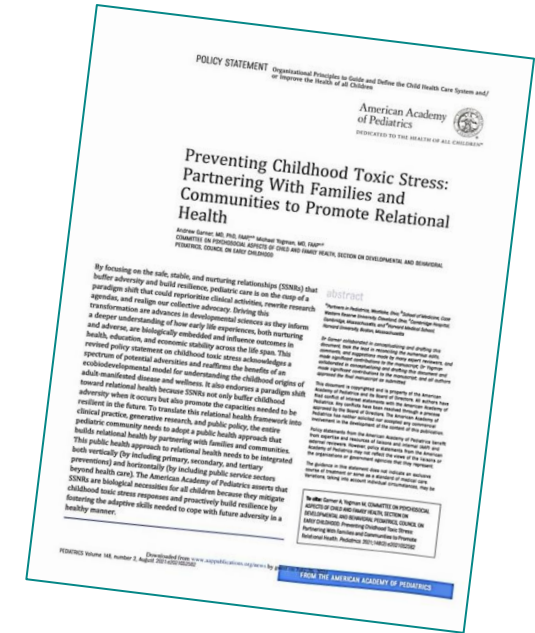
*A national impact network that partners with families and communities to promote Early Relational Health*

<https://nurtureconnection.org>

# 2021 AAP Policy Statement

## Preventing Childhood Toxic Stress: Partnering with Families and Communities to Promote Relational Health

*“By focusing on the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships (SSNRs) that buffer adversity and build resilience, pediatric care is on the cusp of a paradigm shift that could reprioritize clinical activities rewrite research agendas and realign our collective advocacy.”*



# Nurture Connections

## Strategic Priorities

1. Parent leadership as a key equity strategy
2. Advancing ERH across place-based EC community initiatives
3. Multisector and cross-sector workforce development
4. Measurement, research, and evaluation
5. Policy advancement
6. Widespread messaging and dissemination

# Family Network Collaborative

**Alabama:** Families who live in the Rural South

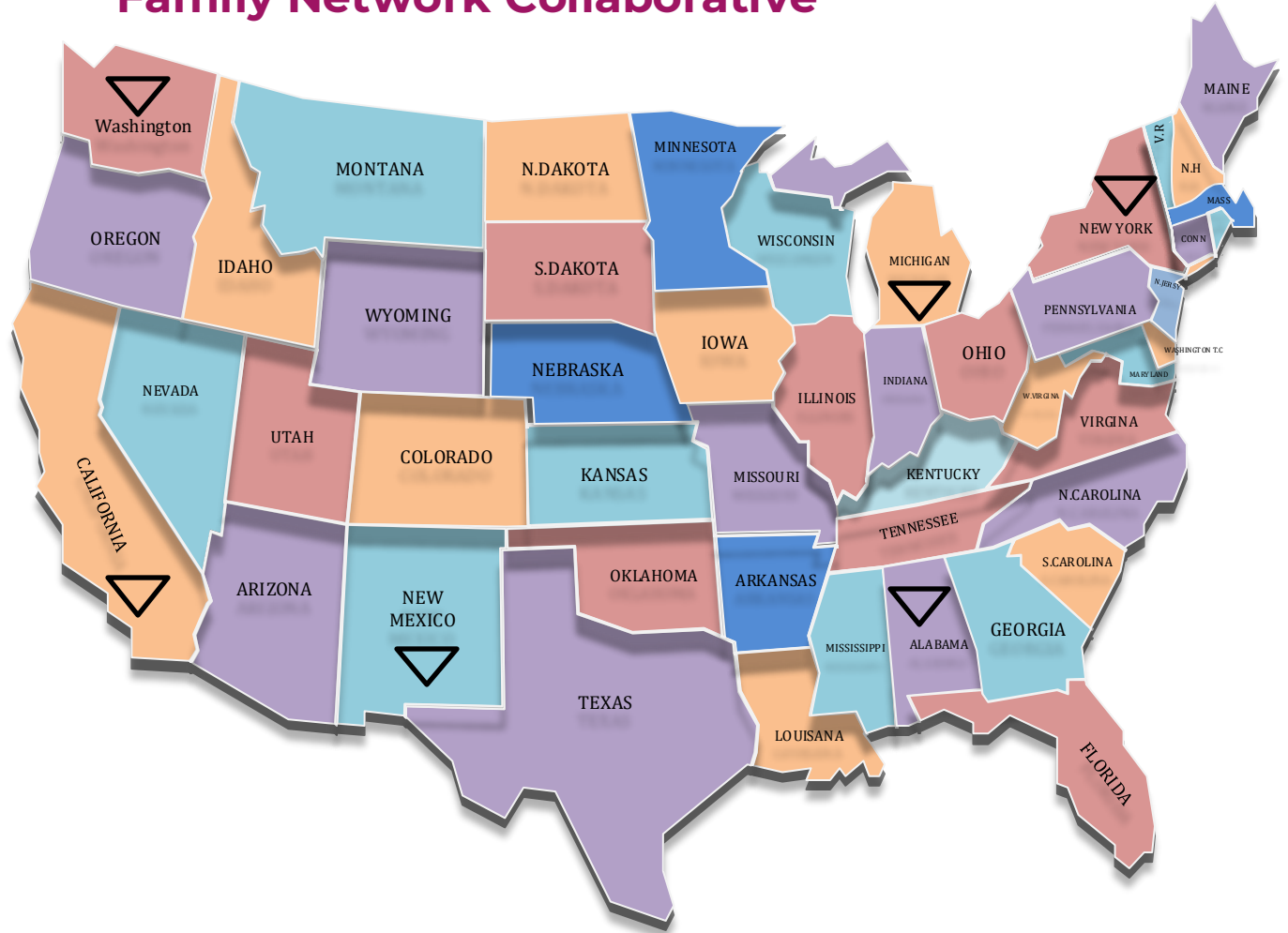
**Michigan:** Home Visiting families who identify as Black and Brown

**New Mexico:** San Felipe Pueblo families who identify as Native Americans

**New York:** Families who identify as Spanish Speaking Immigrants

**California:** Families who have children with Special Health Needs and/or Disabilities

**Washington: WA**  
**Fatherhood Council**



# Building Equity Driven Parent Collaboration



**Participation**  
Parent with Child(ren)  
*"We will keep you informed, and you can become involved"*

**System Goal:** Parents are provided information, resources, volunteer opportunities.

**Parents Experience:** Access to Newsletters, Brochures, Events/Fairs, Social Media, Presentations, Videos, Volunteering.

**Parents Gain Opportunity:** To learn resources, increase knowledge, and provide support to other families.

**Key Equity Driver:** Do parents find it **Accessible** and **Economic Barriers** are **Removed**?



**Involvement**  
Parent with Lived Experience  
*"We learn from your thinking"*

**System Goal:** Parent input supports decision-making.

**Parents Experience:** Involvement in Surveys, Focus Groups, Interviews.

**Parents Gain Opportunity:** To share experiences and insights for change.

**Key Equity Driver:** Do parents feel **Safe** to share honest feedback?



**Engagement**  
Parent Leader  
*"You are teaching us, and we are thinking differently"*

**System Goal:** Parents identify strengths and challenges and are integrated into the process.

**Parents Experience:** Membership on Authentic, Co-empowered, Steering Committees and Advisory Boards.

**Parents Gain Opportunity:** To share lived experiences with programs and meet family goals.

**Key Equity Driver:** Do parents understand the **Purpose** of the group and why their **Voice** is **Important**?



**Partnership**  
Parent Consultant  
*"Your expertise is critical to how we address this issue"*

**System Goal:** Parents are Co-Designers and help to plan, make decisions, implement, evaluate.

**Parents Experience:** Knowledge in Presentation Delivery, Agenda Design, Meeting Facilitation, Transparent Communications.

**Parents Gain Opportunity:** To develop skills, knowledge, and trusted relationships.

**Key Equity Driver:** Do parents **Trust** it is safe to **Disrupt** the power flow?



**Steering**  
Intersectional Professional  
*"We need your expertise in our efforts for you to have Positional Power"*

**System Goal:** Intersectional Professionals have "dual expertise" and drive planning, decision making, implementation, evaluation.

**Intersectional Professionals Experience:** Hired in Leadership Roles with Responsibilities, Authority and Lead or Co-lead change.

**Intersectional Professionals Gain Opportunity:** To combine lived experience, expertise, professional skills, and motivation to change systems.

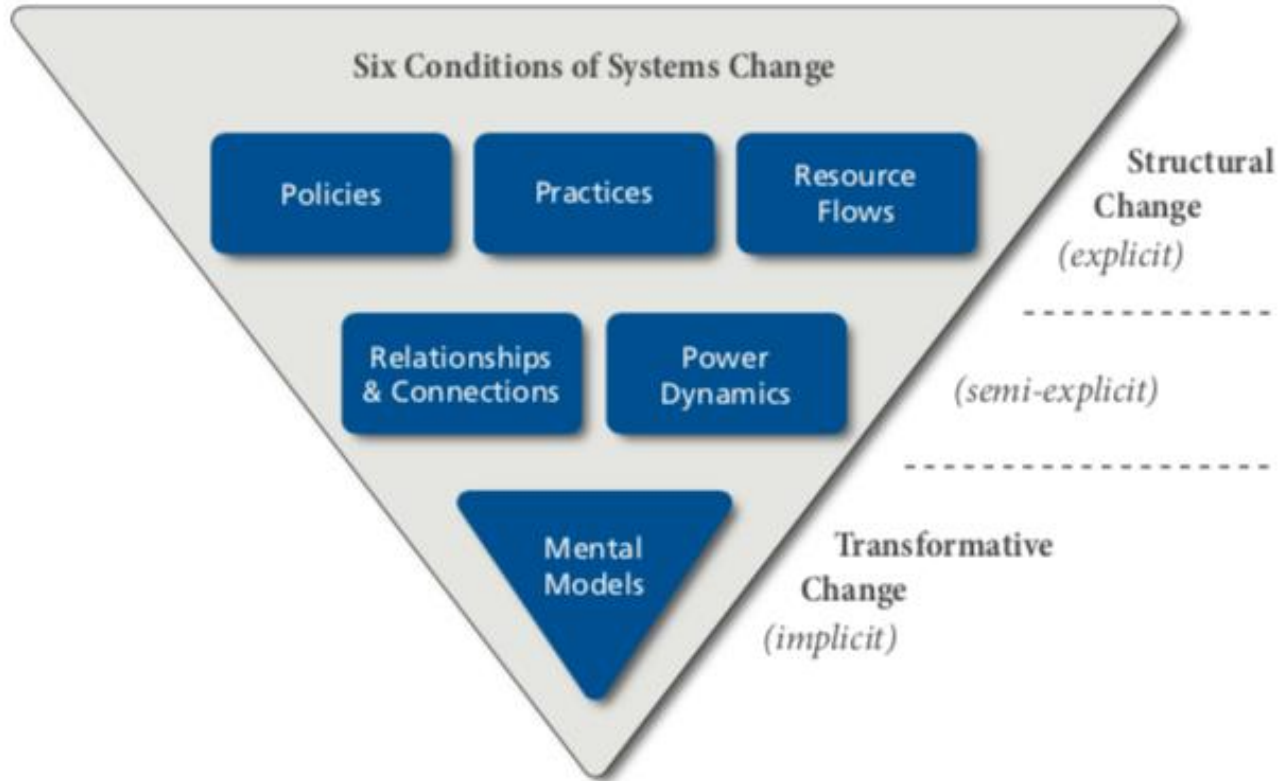
**Key Equity Driver:** Do Intersectional Professionals **Lead** or **Co-Lead** as a paid professional?

# Early Childhood System

*A well-functioning early childhood system reaches families with the help they need, improves the coordination of services and supports, promotes a climate of support for early childhood, and increases parent engagement and equity.*

CSSP ECS Performance Assessment  
Toolkit, 2019

# Six Conditions of System Change





# Bundle for Advanced, Team-based, High Performing Medical Homes for Young Children

## Redesigned Well-Child Visits

- Holistic, **team-based care**
- Comprehensive **well-child visits** based on Bright Futures guidelines and EPSDT
- Family-centered, **strengths-based, relational**, holistic approaches
- **Recommended screening** for development, social-emotional health, maternal depression and social determinants of health (SDOH)
- Reach Out and Read as universal promotion

## Relational Care Coordination

- **Routine** care coordination as part of medical home
- **Intensive care coordination** for more complex medical conditions or social risks
- **Relational care coordination staff** (e.g., community health workers, peer navigators)
- More **effective responses, completed referrals, and linkages** to community

## Other Services and Enhanced Supports

- **Co-located programs in primary care** to promote ERH and development (e.g., DULCE, Healthy Steps, VIP)
- **Integrate mental health**
- **Families engaged** as advisors and partners
- **Referrals and/or linkages** to other services (e.g., home visiting, early intervention, dental care, early care and education, parent-child mental health therapy, nutrition programs)

Adapted from: Johnson K, Bruner C. *A Sourcebook on Medicaid's Role in Early Childhood: Advancing high performing medical homes and improving lifelong health*. Child and Family Policy Center. 2018. [https://www.inckmarks.org/docs/pdfs\\_for\\_Medicaid\\_and\\_EPSDT\\_page/SourcebookMEDICAIDYOUNGCHILDRENALL.pdf](https://www.inckmarks.org/docs/pdfs_for_Medicaid_and_EPSDT_page/SourcebookMEDICAIDYOUNGCHILDRENALL.pdf)  
Willis DW, Paradis N, Johnson K. The paradigm shift to early relational health: A network movement. *Zero to Three*. 2022;42(4):22-30.



# The Relational Health Workforce

Relational care coordinators  
Family development specialists  
Family service workers  
Community health workers  
Home visitors  
Family coaches  
Promotores  
Doulas  
Family navigators

## Connection as a Social Determinant of Health

Research repeatedly demonstrates that social connection strongly influences health. Feeling connected to a community was one of the strengths identified in the community engagement data from this assessment.

“The work of creating health is the work of creating connection.”  
- DIDI PERSHOUSE

# ERH Policy Goals Aim to Increase



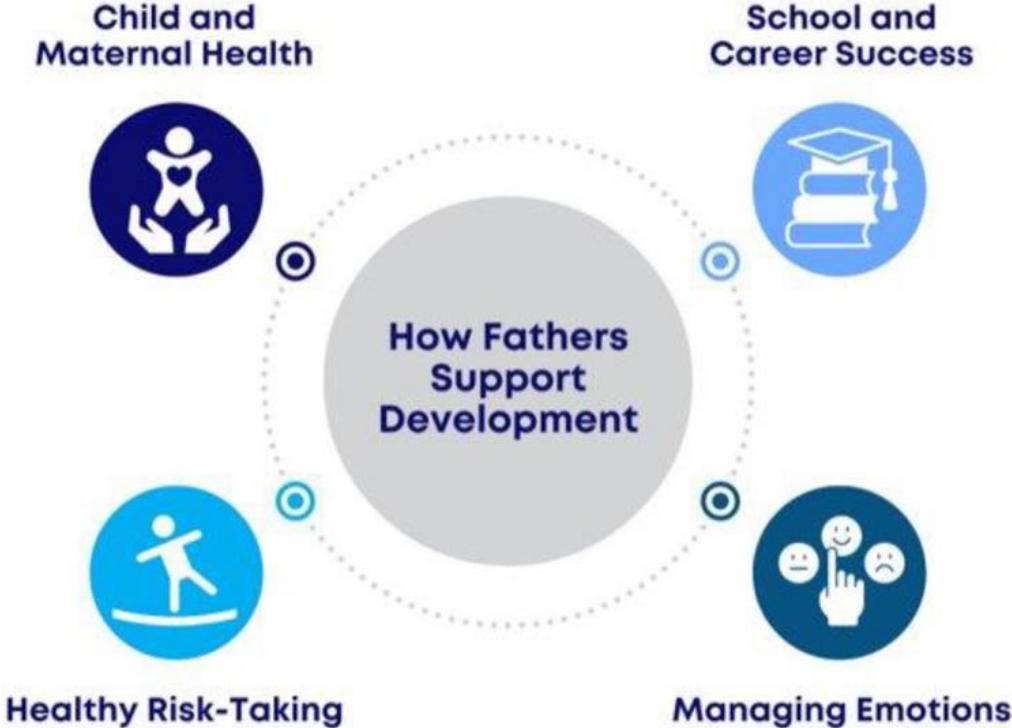
# Father contributions to child resilience



- Father's style:** high arousal, energetic physicality, guided participation in daily skills, joint adventures, and conflict resolution
- promotes children's flexible approach and social competence within intimate bonds and social groups.
  - expands children's interests, sharpens cognitions, tunes emotional regulation, encourages exploration, and supports the search for identity

Feldman, R. (2023). *Father contribution to human resilience*. *Development and Psychopathology*, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579423000354>

# Father's Support Development



# Prenatal father engagement can look like....

Support healthy habits for mothers

Frequently attend doctor's visits

Try a class for new or expectant parents

Talk, read, and sing to your baby/baby-to-be

Be present for labor, delivery, and immediately after birth



# Children with positive and attuned relationships with fathers tend to.....



**Be more confident and have higher self-esteem**



**Have stronger language and cognitive skills**



**Enjoy stronger early connections with peers**



**Be more sociable throughout early childhood**



**Perform better academically (reading and math scores)**



**Have positive benefits that last into adulthood**

# Healthy Risk Taking

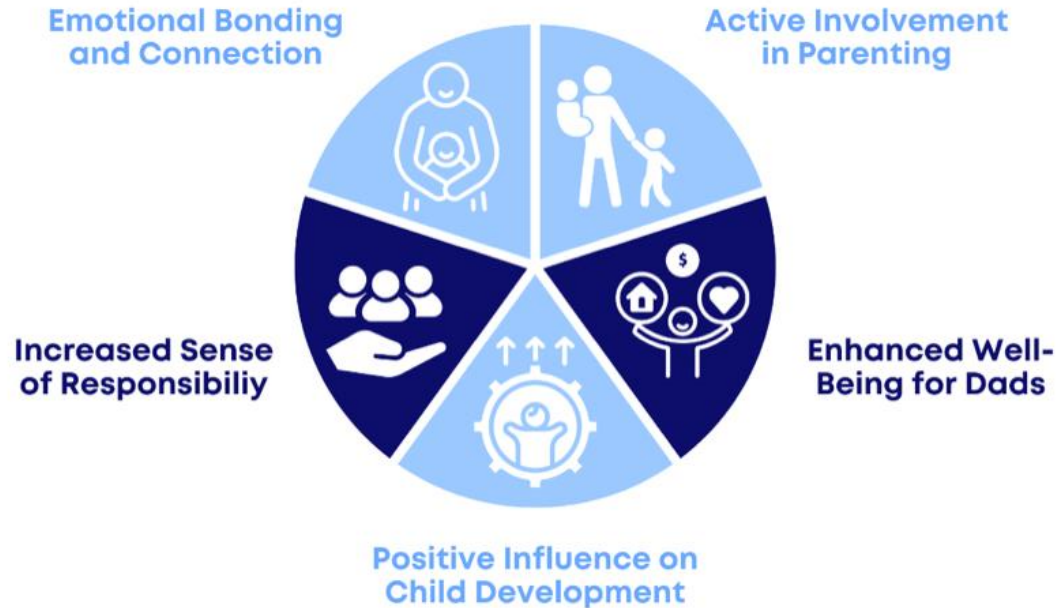
Fathers tend to encourage more problem solving and healthy risk taking among their children



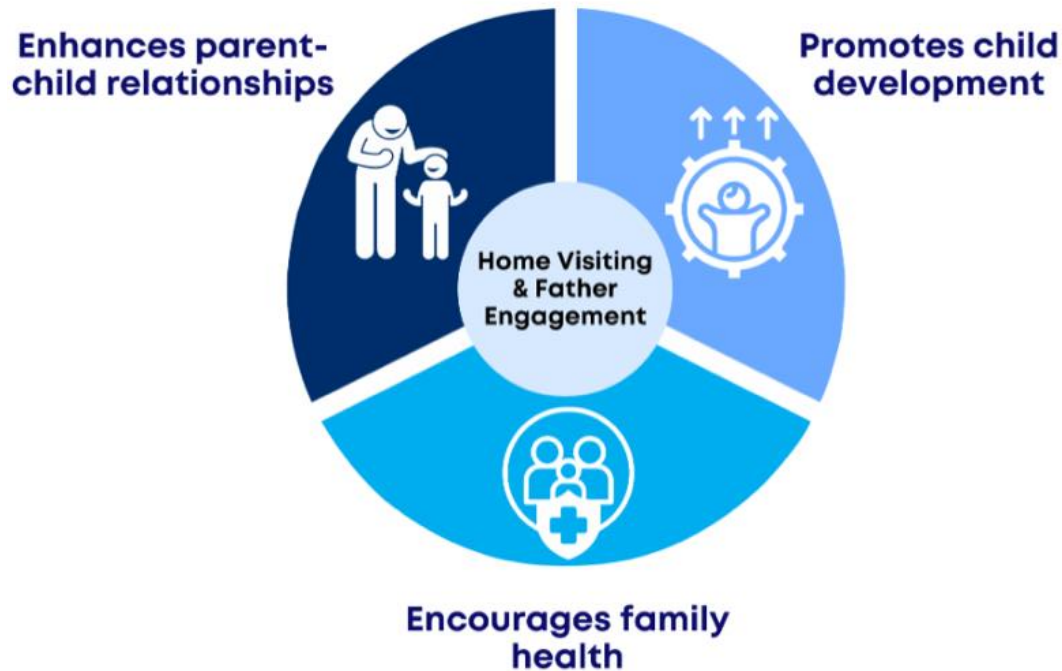
Fathers provide security in the context of controlled excitement of play or discipline



# Fatherhood is a transformative experience for fathers and their children



# Father engagement in home visiting



# Father Engagement in Home Visiting

Improved knowledge of child development and positive parenting practices



Better anger management, resulting in less physical discipline



HOME VISITING  
OUTCOMES



Stronger communication with their partners



Connections to employment, educational opportunities, & community services and resources

# Yet, in early childhood services, “dad’s are often invisible”

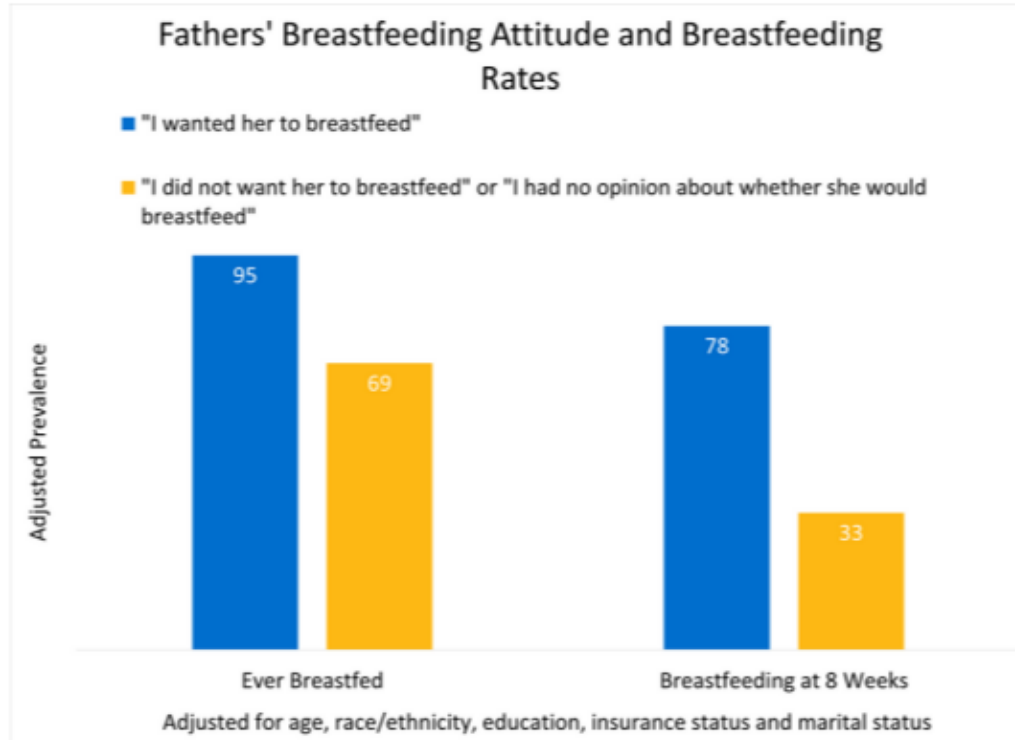
- 56% of dad’s share parental work
- High levels of father involvement across all cultures
- Poor quality child care is as important to fathers as mothers
- Children experience a father’s parenting different than mothers
- Perinatal depression: 2:1 maternal depression to paternal depression
- Father’s vocabulary with children is a stronger predictors to development than mother’s language
- In attachment theory, fathers are largely absent in the discuss
- Strange situation is not as meaningful, nor studied, for fathers
- Still-face with dad’s is same as mothers
- Fathers use clearer behavioral cues, and a child works harder at tasks non-verbally w/ father’s engagements
- Skin-to-skin with fathers is no different than with moms
- Fathers’ brains light up in engagement with parenting as do mother’s
- Fathers provide active interactions with infants, and have unpredictable play
- Fathers seem to provide real world discipline/teaching
- Father roles and relationships for child benefit trump gender requirements

# PRAMS for Dads

Craig Garfield, Lurie Children's Hospital

- The first public health survey of new fathers by the CDC's Pregnancy Risk Assessment System (PRAMS)
- Birth cohort sampling with validated survey methodology to collect about men's health and experiences during perinatal period
- Purpose:
  - Give voice to fatherhood experience
  - Fill gaps to our understanding of father's lived experiences
  - Focus on paternal health, attitudes, behaviors and influences and their impacts on MCH during perinatal period

# PRAMS for Dads



## Applying Insights From Human Connection and Co-Regulation: Supporting Fathers in Human Services Programs

Authors: Junlei Li, Thelma Ramirez, Katie Pahigiannis,  
Aleta Meyer, Pooja Curtin

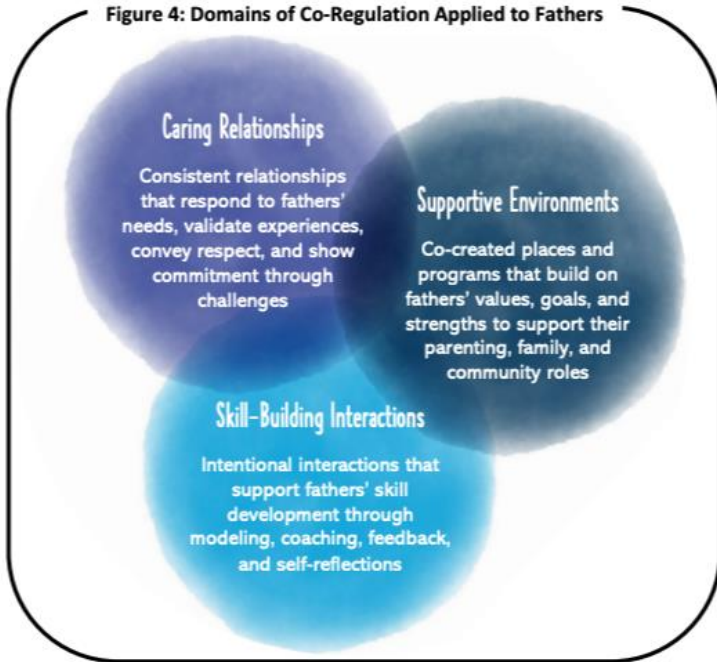
OPRE Report #2023-254



*Human services programs can play an active role in reshaping the narrative around fathers and helping to heal and strengthen the personal connections fathers have in their lives.*

# Building a ecosystem of caring relationships for fathers

Figure 4: Domains of Co-Regulation Applied to Fathers



## Father Engagement Goals

- Affirm Fathers' Identity
- Build a Sense of Belonging
- Cultivate Program and Community Leadership



# A co-regulation framework emphasizes the relational contexts and relationship-focused approaches

- The essential elements in the co-regulation framework: **build relationships, strengthen skill-building interactions, and structure the environment**
- Transforming narratives about fatherhood into connections, strengths and resilience

*“By focusing on the process of co-regulation, we shift from an emphasis on individual markers of resilience to a model that recognizes the importance of relationships as a context for healing and growth.”*

# Six Relational Contexts for Father Engagement





## Fathers' Self-Connection Provides a Critical Foundation for Connection with Others

*“You can’t help  
the father  
without healing  
the man”*

- Help fathers identify their strengths, challenges, and resiliencies to realize the positive and unique contributions of their role and relationships as a father
- Support the building and sustaining of a positive self-concept to counter negative stereotypes and external messages of father’s value or role
- Support opportunities for peer relationships that provide self-exploration, self-worth and a motivation for change



## Parent-child relationships can help the father and the child flourish

- Adopt the co-regulation framework that further highlights the benefits of the parent-child relationship
- Expand an understanding of child development that equips fathers with tools to strengthen relationships with their children
- Focus on the quality of the interactions – ERH
- Address the systemic barriers and pervasive narratives about fatherhood that hinder father's efforts



## Strengthening Co-Parenting Relationships that Foster Positive Connections

- Structure the program and service environment to be welcoming to both parents as an important aspect of co-regulation and relationship-building
- Recognize and honor the enormous variability in co-parenting, whether coupled or not, and support the capacity for co-parent co-regulation
- And for those programs that cannot (yet) do co-parenting services, then work to support the co-parent, and the father, in turn.



## Interactions between Program Staff and Fathers Offer Opportunities for Positive Connections and Affirmation

- Highlight that small interactions between fathers and program staff have big impacts on engagement and retention
- Embrace the tension between fidelity to a program model and the approaches necessary for father engagement and connection
- Structure program service environments to engage fathers, affirm their identity, foster a sense of belonging, and provide opportunities for fathers' partnership and leadership
- Develop materials that prioritize fathers as parents
- Support and encourage staff to cultivate, mentor, and build the talent pipeline of men within the EC workforce



## Through Shared Experiences, Positive Relationships with Peers Can Support Fathers' Engagement in Programming

- Provide opportunities for peer interactions within a services context to empower fathers with greater feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy
- Advance peer supports to promote engagement in programs
- Co-design peer support programs as intentional and critical approaches to promote authentic engagement
- Engage, listen and learn from the wisdom and knowledge of fathers and communities for transforming all human services



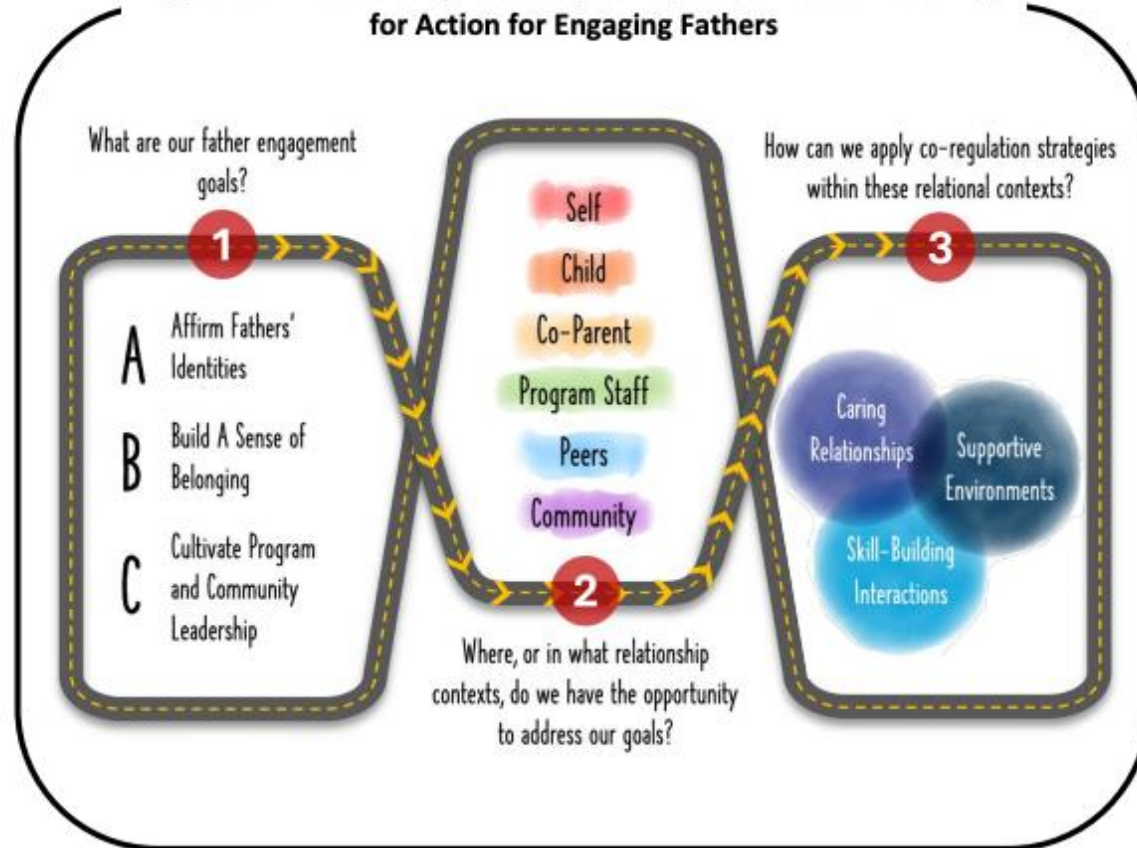
## Fathers Connections to Communities Must Be Acknowledged and Strengthened

- Champion the tremendous potential by supporting the many types of important relationships and roles fathers have (and can have) in the community
- Ensure that fathers have proximal, visible, and accessible resources and social support to navigate complex systems
- Make visible and disrupt the unhealed root causes and enduring punishments within communities can keep father's from realizing important roles and responsibilities



# A roadmap for action to support father engagement

Figure 6. A Relationship-Focused, Co-Regulation-Based Roadmap for Action for Engaging Fathers



# State of Fatherhood In Washington

## 2024 Study

*In support of the WA Fatherhood Council's Goals and Vision, this study is the first-of-its-kind effort to understand the Washington fatherhood ecosystem to develop a clearer understanding of progress among individual agencies, programs and policies toward that vision.*

A photograph of a man with glasses hugging a young child from behind. The man is wearing a blue t-shirt and the child is wearing a yellow shirt. They are outdoors with trees in the background. The image is partially overlaid with a black semi-transparent box containing text and logos.

*Dove*  
MEN  
+care

**Dads who care**

Celebrating

#RealDadMoments



***Senator Reverend Warnock***

*“As a dad myself, I know that the transition into the lifechanging and important role of fatherhood can be a powerful lever for change”*

One of the authors of  
**Bipartisan Father’s Day Resolution, 2023**



**Father-child  
relationships start  
now.**

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# Thank you!

**David W. Willis, MD**  
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<https://nurtureconnection.org>