

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Supporting Fathers and Strengthening Families

Over the past several decades, fathers have nearly tripled the time they spend with their children. Involved fatherhood is associated with better outcomes on nearly every measure of child wellbeing. Healthy father involvement can also serve as a protective factor to strengthen families at risk for child maltreatment. Most children are not at risk for maltreatment by their parents, and child abuse prevention programs have evolved from focusing solely on reducing risk factors to also building protective factors in families. Some programs target fathers specifically, and aim to promote positive parenting skills, appropriate discipline, effective communication, emotional support, and stress management in fathers to build protective factors and strengthen families. This policy brief highlights the link between involved fatherhood and protective factors in families.

Involved fathers are important for child wellbeing and development

Over the past several decades, father involvement has increased dramatically.¹ A 2013 report from the Pew Research Center shows that since 1965, fathers have nearly tripled the time they spend with their children.² Fathers' roles in their families have also evolved, with old conceptions of the father as "distant breadwinner" or male "role model" giving way to a more holistic role as "equal co-parent".³ Alongside these changes, researchers and academics have devoted a growing interest in studying the role that fathers play in the lives of their children. Involved fatherhood is linked to better outcomes on nearly every measure of child wellbeing, from cognitive development and educational achievement to self-esteem and pro-social behavior.⁴

A number of factors influence the nature of a father's involvement in his child's life. For example, a substantial body of research supports the notion that when parents get along, both the quantity and quality of father involvement are higher.⁵ Fathers who are romantically involved with the mother are consistently more likely to be involved with the child across a wide range of demographic, economic, and residential domains.⁶ Research also shows that even when parents do not live together and are not in a romantic relationship, their ability to cooperate and engage in positive co-parenting can have a strong influence on paternal involvement.⁷

Healthy father involvement can also serve as a protective factor against maltreatment. Children who live with two married biological parents are 8 times less likely to be victims of maltreatment compared to children living with one parent who has an unmarried partner in the household.⁸ Moreover, when fathers nurture their infant children and take on other early important parenting responsibilities, they develop connections with their children that serve as protective factors against maltreatment.⁹ An involved, nurturing father also helps to reduce overall family stress and is correlated with lower rates of child neglect.¹⁰

Fathers and father figures are disproportionately implicated in child maltreatment

The majority of child abuse cases in the United States are perpetrated by parents. According to the U.S. Children's Bureau, in 2013 one or both parents were responsible for 91.4 percent of cases of maltreated children.¹¹ Of those parents identified as perpetrators of child abuse, fathers were solely responsible for reported child maltreatment cases 20.3 percent of the time.¹² Though fathers are more likely to be involved in moderate to severe abuse cases, the majority of maltreatment cases (63.2 percent) involve only the mother or both parents.¹³ Although mothers are involved in more cases of child maltreatment (most often, cases of neglect), fathers are disproportionately represented among the perpetrator population because mothers tend to take on a larger share of parenting duties and head more single-family households than fathers.¹⁴ Importantly, mothers' boyfriends and stepfathers, who often lack the same history and bond with the child, are more likely to abuse children than biological fathers.¹⁵

Helping men be better fathers helps increase protective factors in families

The risk factors for child abuse are varied and include parents' lack of understanding of child development and age-appropriate expectations, low income and concentrated neighborhood disadvantage such as high poverty areas or high unemployment rates, social isolation, parenting stress and poor parent-child relationships, and family disorganization and violence.¹⁶ Child abuse prevention programs have shifted from solely trying to mitigate risk factors to also building protective factors in families. The protective factors for families associated with lower incidents of child abuse include: nurturing and attachment within families; knowledge of parenting and child development; parental emotional resilience; connection to social support; concrete support in the form of adequate food, housing, and other essential services; and social and emotional competence for children. The focus on protective factors is intended to help parents with risk factors for abuse and neglect learn effective parenting skills, thereby reducing the likelihood for child abuse and maltreatment at home.

Federally-funded Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs, such as the Texas Fatherhood EFFECT program aim to increase protective factors in families by increasing fathers' positive parenting skills, appropriate discipline, effective communication, emotional support, and stress management.¹⁷ Providing services and programming to fathers to provide family support and improve their parenting can have a double effect, by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors. As a result, not only can children face a reduced risk of maltreatment, but they can also benefit from positive father involvement. Programs and services that are already family-centered should work to be more inclusive of fathers and develop strategies to engage fathers in their programming.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

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