

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Transforming Communities for Fathers through Evidence-Based Systems-Level Change

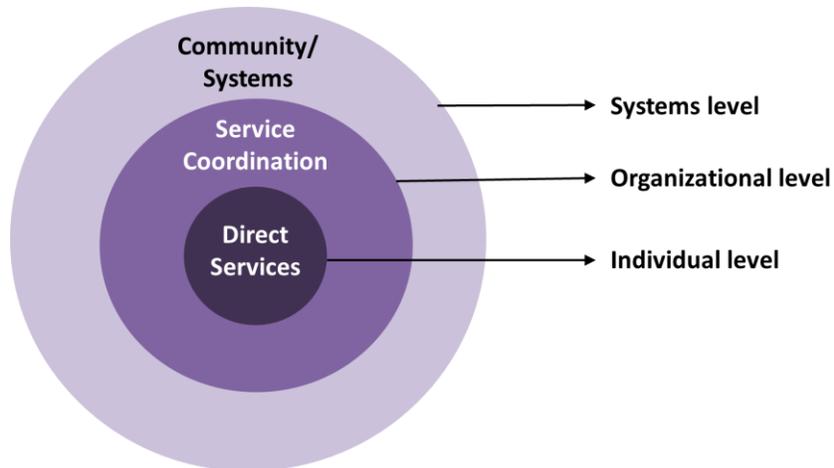
Why Systems-Level Change for Fathers?

Over the past several decades, research on father involvement and support has reached a resounding, if somewhat self-evident, conclusion: fathers matter. Although a substantial body of research now demonstrates a compelling link between positive father involvement and improved child outcomes, the research on the effects of programs aimed at strengthening and supporting fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives continues to evolve.

The last several decades have also brought about dramatic changes for American families. Many men are becoming fathers in particularly disadvantageous situations: young, unmarried, and lacking in education. These fathers face a multitude of barriers to being the fathers they want to be, from poor employment prospects and high incarceration rates, to juggling multiple parenting roles among the children they live with and the ones they do not. Other men are assuming more of the caregiver role within their household, yet these fathers often have limited parenting skills and few opportunities to acquire essential skills.

Both federal and state investments in promoting the positive impact fathers have on their children and families continue to increase, but these investments must be considered within the larger contexts of systemic shifts in family structure, the labor market, and incarceration rates. Investments in fatherhood programs should be embedded within a larger system of support to have an impact large enough to change community-level indicators. The complex needs of at-risk fathers and their families often extend beyond what single programs can provide in isolation, and many community-level issues negatively impacting families cannot be addressed with a service-level only approach.

Service coordination is an important step toward developing a comprehensive system for fathers and their families within a community, but communities have to work beyond service coordination to implement system-level strategies that address the broad policy, practice, or community infrastructure issues that impact fathers and benefit the community at-large (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Strategies and Level of Influence

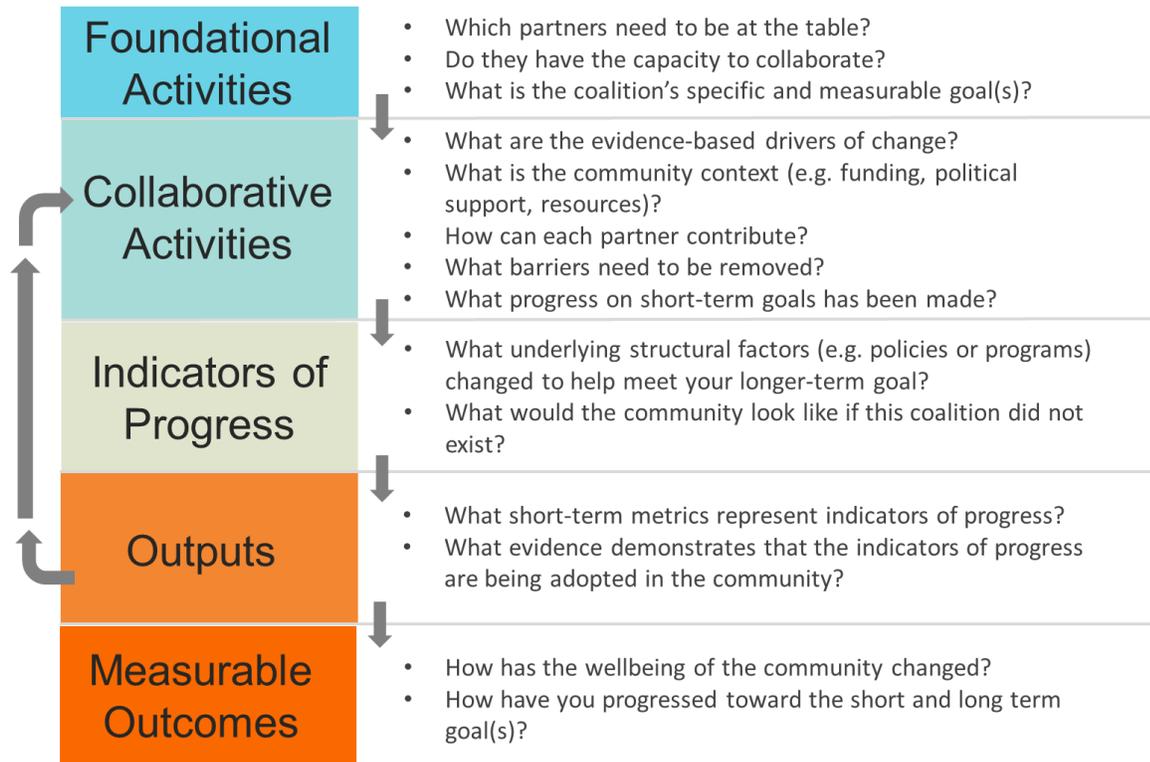
What is Evidence-Based Systems-Level Change?

Although many factors are important for making progress toward systems-level goals (including having clear, agreed-upon, and measurable goals; stakeholder organizations who are ready for collaboration; external funding; political champions), missing from most initiatives, but critical to success, is the need for communities to identify evidence-based drivers of change when determining strategies to achieve their goals. In other words, when communities decide upon their goals, they need to identify the known predictors of their goals and align their strategies and action steps accordingly. Many coalitions attempt to reinvent the wheel—often haphazardly hypothesizing drivers of change—when decades of research and prior collective impact initiatives have already identified evidence-based drivers of change (i.e., we know they work). Importantly, community experience and voice are evidence too, but should be complemented with research and practice. Identifying evidence-based drivers of change and developing strategies to move the needle on those drivers is key to making progress toward community goals.

The Framework

Evidence-based systems-level change occurs over the course of five phases, often iterative, beginning with foundation activities, which include identifying the community partners who need to be at the table and agreeing on a shared, measurable goal (Figure 2). During the next phase, collaborative activities (a phase that is revisited often), stakeholders identify the evidence-based drivers of change for their agreed upon goal, how each partner can contribute, and what barriers need to be addressed. In the indicators of progress phase, stakeholders develop evidence-based strategies and action steps for assessing and measuring the interim changes occurring in a community as they work toward systems-level change. During the outputs phase, stakeholders measure their short-term progress, and in the measurable outcomes phase, stakeholders assess their progress toward the overall goal.

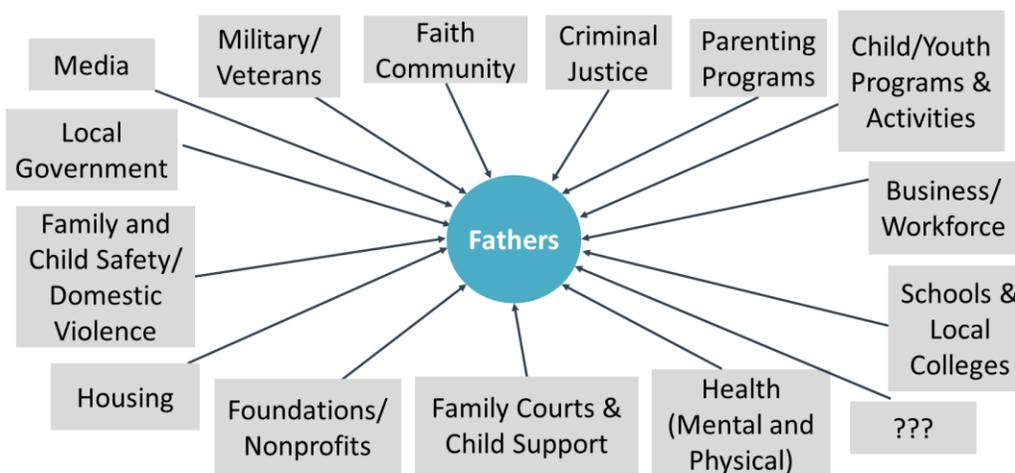
Figure 2. Framework for Evidence-Based Systems Level Change



Foundational Activities

In the first phase, foundational activities, stakeholders identify which community partners need to be at the table (Figure 3), determine whether partners are ready and able to collaborate, and develop the specific and measurable goals for the community.

Figure 3. Who Needs To Be At The Table?

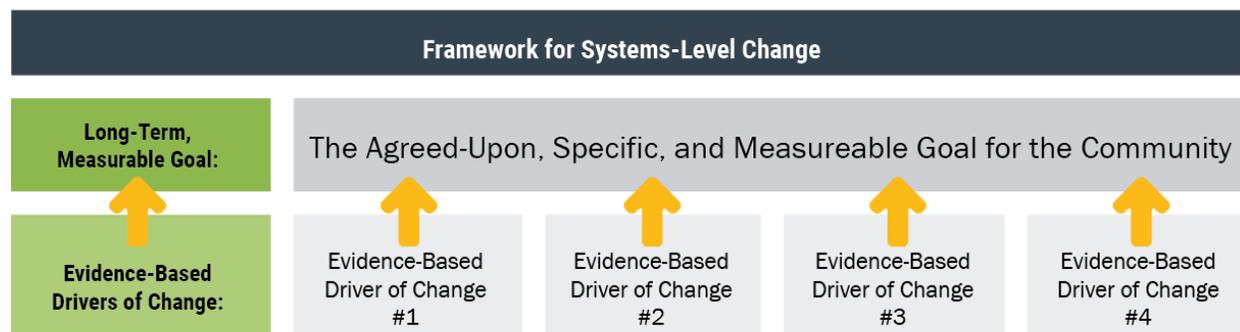


Importantly, community stakeholders also identify methods to measure and track progress toward their agreed upon goals. It can take coalitions months or years to coalesce and agree on a set of measurable goals. As the systems-level work evolves, new stakeholders may need to be invited to the table, or priorities may need to shift depending on certain factors, including the local economic and political context.

Collaborative Activities

Once a coalition of stakeholders, who are ready to collaborate, develop and commit to a set of specific and measurable goals for the community, the collaborative activities phase begins. The collaborative activities phase includes identifying evidence-based drivers of change for each goal and assessing the status of each evidence-based driver in the community. Stakeholders review the research literature and examine other community-wide initiatives with similar goals to identify the known predictors/drivers of change for their goal (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Evidence-Based Drivers of Change for Community Goals



If a community wants to increase fathers’ engagement with their children (and, importantly, had a more specific and measurable goal, such as the percent of children living with their father; the number of fathers in neighborhood, or the percent of children born to unmarried parents), they would first identify the key predictors of father engagement (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Evidence-Based Drivers of Change for Father Engagement



Assessing the status of each evidence-based driver of change in the community lays the groundwork for developing strategies and action steps. If, for example, local data indicate that high school drop-

out rates are high among teen males (part of financial stability), stakeholders can work to identify strategies (evidence-based to a large degree) and action steps to reduce the drop-out rate. There may be barriers that need to be removed (e.g., limited access to free or affordable tutoring) or existing supports that need to be strengthened (e.g., expanding an existing afterschool program to serve more students for more hours). Identifying which stakeholders and coalition members are particularly well suited to work on specific strategies is also a key part of the collaborative activities phase.

Importantly, the collaborative activities phase is revisited regularly throughout the journey toward systems-level change. Stakeholders will need to come back together often to reevaluate community context to identify any existing strengths to leverage in their progress toward systems-level change, continuously reassess the status of each evidence-based driver, and reflect on progress toward both interim and overall goals; develop new strategies and action steps based on reevaluations; and as stakeholders and coalition members come and go, reassign responsibilities to partners.

Indicators of Progress

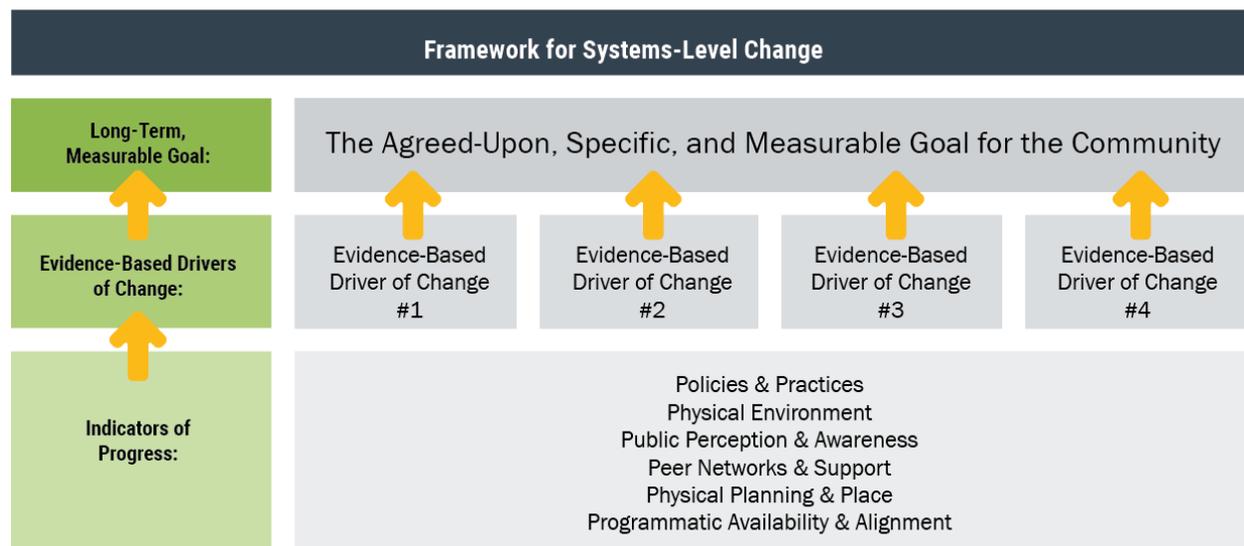
The indicators of progress, phase three, provide stakeholders with a framework to develop strategies and action steps and to assess and measure the interim changes occurring in a community as they work toward systems-level change. Each indicator of progress represents an aspect of the community that can be improved or enhanced in multiple ways to nudge the needle and move a community forward in their systems-level work. Each indicator should be measurable. Finding ways to track the indicators of progress is key to demonstrate interim progress. The indicators of progress framework includes: 1) policies and practices; 2) physical environment; 3) public perception and awareness; 4) peer networks and support; 5) physical planning and space; and 6) programmatic availability and alignment (Table 1).

Table 1. Indicators of Progress and Definitions

Indicator of Progress	Definition
Policies & practices	Decisions made by a legislative or administrative body which determine what actions and implementation options are available to communities and organizations
Physical environment	The physical characteristics of a space that compose its character, utility, and potential
Public perception & awareness	Opinions and knowledge of the public and media
Peer networks & support	Integration and linkages between community groups, individuals, families, businesses, and other entities
Physical planning & place	Spatial relationships between systems (e.g., job access, transit routes)
Programmatic availability and alignment	Ensuring adequate availability of evidence-based services and resources that are aligned with: 1) larger systems goals, 2) the need in the community, and 3) other programs across sectors

Importantly, the indicators of progress align with the evidence-based drivers of change identified by the stakeholders. Once stakeholders have identified and agreed upon a set of evidence-based drivers of change for the larger goal, they can use the indicators of progress framework to develop strategies and action steps (Figure 6) to target each driver of change (and ultimately, the long-term goal). For example, for each evidence-based driver, stakeholders could identify policies or practices that need to change (e.g., expulsion or suspension policies that keep students out of school), develop new programming (e.g., new or expanded afterschool programs for teens at risk of dropping out of high school) to meet an identified need in the community, and/or find ways to shift the public perception or understanding.

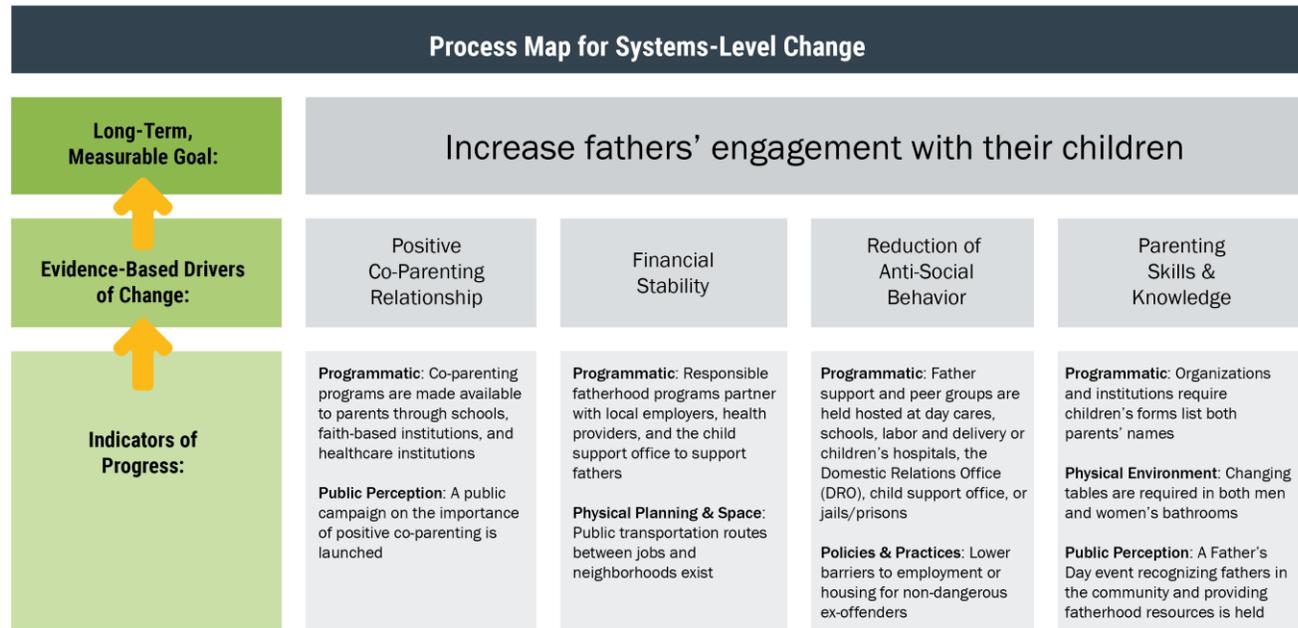
Figure 6. Indicators of Progress for Evidence-Based Systems Level Change



Often times there is evidence for which strategies can support an evidence-based driver of change, but communities should think creatively as well. Not all stakeholders or community members involved in an initiative will participate in developing strategies for each evidence-based driver, nor will they take responsibility for all strategies for a particular evidence-based driver. Stakeholders should identify the best members (based on members’ skillsets, interests, connections to the community, and available resources) to take responsibility for carrying out each strategy. By measuring and tracking the strategies, stakeholders can rely on this framework to demonstrate their progress. Actualized strategies become indicators of progress toward the larger goal.

For a community targeting increasing father engagement as their long-term goal, one can see in Figure 7 how the indicators of progress framework provides structure for identifying strategies and measuring progress.

Figure 7. Indicators of Progress for Father Engagement



In this example, the community identified positive co-parenting relationships as an important evidence-based predictor of father engagement (i.e., an evidence-based driver of change). For the positive co-parenting evidence-based driver, the community identified two potential strategies:

- 1) Making co-parenting programs available to parents through schools, faith-based institutions, and healthcare institutions;
- 2) A public perception/awareness strategy launching a public awareness campaign on the importance of positive co-parenting.

As these strategies are accomplished, they become indicators of progress toward the larger goal. Even before the larger father engagement goal is met, the community can show that by developing 25 new fatherhood programs serving 100 fathers a year, and launching public awareness campaigns that reached 10,000 people, they are increasing positive co-parenting, which will ultimately increase fathers' engagement with their children.

Outputs

Outputs represent the short-term metrics indicating a community is on the right track. Outputs represent metrics for the indicators of progress. For the father engagement goal, they may measure the number of fathers who attended newly available or expanded programs or the number of organizations who now require children's forms list both parents' names. Outputs help quantify a community's progress toward their goals.

Outcomes

The measurable outcomes are the community's overarching measurable goals. Outcomes can also be examined more broadly by identifying what the community would look like had the coalition not existed; what policies or programs would not exist but not for the coalition; and if the coalition went away, what would remain in the community? The outcome in this example would be the percentage increase in children who have an involved father.

Conclusion

Decades of research into the predictors of many aspects of child and family wellbeing suggest that we often know the evidence-based drivers of change for the intended outcome and the evidence-based programs or practices that affect these evidence-based drivers of change. Instead of recreating the wheel with every initiative, stakeholders should take advantage of what we already know and develop strategies that target evidence-based drivers of change to help ensure success in reaching the long-term goal. Leveraging known predictors of a specific goal sets communities up for success because it helps focus often-limited resources in the most efficient way possible.

A community's interim progress toward systems-level change is measurable and should be measured. The indicators of progress developed here reflect key aspects of a community that need to change to move a community forward in their systems-level work. The indicators of progress serve a dual purpose in helping communities first identify and develop strategies to meet their goals and second, assess interim progress toward the larger goal.

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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.