

## STRENGTHENING FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN COLORADO



Colorado has long taken a leading role in advancing responsible fatherhood through statewide collaboration, community-based programming, and integration of father-inclusive practice into early childhood and human service systems. As a result, many positive resources exist but more services to support fathers, especially young fathers, are needed statewide.

Fatherhood programs have a critical role to play in improving long-term outcomes for children and families. A review of statewide research, program models, and national evidence underscores that engaged fathers contribute to children's academic, social, emotional, and economic well-being. Colorado's fatherhood landscape includes a diverse mix of programs housed in county agencies, Family Resource Centers, and nonprofits organizations. These programs emphasize parenting education, healthy relationships, co-parenting, economic stability, peer support, and community engagement.

### Father Engagement and Impacts on Child Well-Being

National research demonstrates that children benefit when fathers—resident or nonresident—are positively and consistently involved in their lives. Children with engaged fathers experience:

- lower rates of poverty, infant mortality, behavioral issues, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and future involvement with the criminal justice system,
- higher levels of academic achievement, social-emotional development, and resilience, and
- increased likelihood of economic and family stability in adulthood.

For nonresident fathers, engagement reduces risk factors when paired with positive co-parenting and financial support. Research shows that warm, supportive father-child relationships are more predictive of positive outcomes than frequency of contact alone.

Young fathers, especially teens, face significant barriers – lower educational attainment, economic instability and reduced involvement—highlighting the importance of early, targeted engagement.



### Impact on Mothers and Co-Parenting Relationships

Father engagement also benefits mothers. Increased father involvement is associated with:

- Improved maternal well-being, including reduced depressive symptoms,
- higher-quality parenting by resident mothers, and
- more cooperative co-parenting relationships, even in situations where parents are not romantically involved.

Programs that integrate whole-family approaches—supporting both parents and focusing on strengthening communication, reducing conflict, and improving stability—tend to produce the strongest outcomes.

### Economic Stability and Community Impacts

In addition to the improved wellbeing of children and mothers as discussed above, fatherhood supports provide a wide range of benefits for fathers directly, both in terms of family engagement and personal wellbeing. Fatherhood programs have demonstrated:

- Increased employment and earnings for low-income and nonresident fathers;
- Improved child support compliance; and
- Stronger community ties and reduced social isolation through peer-based father support groups.

Collectively, father engagement initiatives reduce public system involvement and promote multigenerational stability.

### What Fatherhood Resources Currently Exist in Colorado?

Fatherhood programs across Colorado range from county-led human services initiatives to statewide systems-building work. These programs share several core goals: promoting healthy father-child relationships, improving co-parenting, supporting economic stability, and reducing barriers to involvement.

### County and Community-Based Fatherhood Programs

Across multiple counties, providers deliver structured fatherhood classes, mentoring programs, support groups, and one-to-one coaching. Examples include:

- [New Legacy Charter School](#) (Aurora, CO): High school authorized by the CO Charter School Institute open to all students with a special focus on meeting the needs of teen parents (moms and dads) and their children (ages 0-5 yrs).
- [Center on Fathering](#) (El Paso County): A comprehensive suite of classes such as Caring Dads, Fathers in Training, and multi-week fathering courses emphasizing child development, discipline, communication, anger management, and co-parenting. Father-to-Father mentoring and programming for incarcerated fathers are also offered.





- [Fatherhood Program](#) (Jefferson County): Free parenting classes incorporating strengths-based approaches, a co-parenting focus integrating mental health, anger management, communication skill building, and self-care. Classes are offered online and available to those outside Jeffco as well.
- [Hilltop Community Resources](#) (Mesa, Montrose & Delta Counties): A 12-week nurturing fathers class plus economic stability supports, co-parenting and relationship skills, employment supports and financial literacy, and child support navigation.
- [Fatherhood Program at Catholic Charities of Southern Colorado](#) (Pueblo County): Provides 12-session classes on communication, co-parenting, discipline, problem-solving, and help navigating child support.
- [The Pinon Project](#) (Cortez, CO): A 13-week evidence-based course focusing on discipline, communication, and developing healthy father-child interactions. Offers both group and individualized formats.
- [Circle of Parents Support Groups](#) (multiple counties): Peer-led, open-ended parenting groups (including father-specific groups in some areas) providing emotional support, community connection, and shared problem-solving.

#### Statewide Systems-Level Work:

The [Colorado Fatherhood Network](#) (CFN), housed under the Family Resource Center Association (FRCA), provides statewide leadership by:

- Supporting practitioners through training, networking, peer learning, and sharing evidence-based practices;
- Promoting integration of father engagement into early childhood systems—an essential step for improving outcomes in the prenatal to 5 population;
- Providing an organized structure for advancing policy and advocating for father-inclusive approaches; and
- Addressing regional disparities by increasing outreach to rural and underserved communities.

Stakeholders strongly emphasize the value of CFN's systems-level role and its potential to transform how the state engages fathers across all service sectors.

#### Key Challenges and Gaps in Fatherhood Engagement

*What can Colorado's teen parent providers do to help strengthen the statewide service delivery system for young fathers?* Learning about barriers to father involvement and advocating for father-friendly engagement strategies across services are key. Several persistent barriers that limit father engagement and program sustainability include:

##### *Lack of Teen Parent-Focused Programming*

Lack of teen-focused fatherhood programming is a significant service gap in Colorado. Fatherhood programs typically are focused on dads 18 years or older and fail to take into account the specific circumstances and family dynamics faced by teen/student parents and their children.



One thing we can do to support the wellbeing of young families is to strengthen co-parenting supports and tailor resources to the specific needs of teen parent families struggling to navigate high-conflict situations with limited life experience.

Programs that work with both parents—together or separately—improve:

- Child well-being
- Parental cooperation
- Financial stability
- Long-term father involvement

Programming should prioritize co-parenting education, mediation access, the outside role of grandparents in teen parent families, and whole-family case management.

*Funding Instability and Inconsistent Infrastructure*

Historical fluctuations in funding for fatherhood work have weakened program continuity. The absence of a long-term funding strategy jeopardizes sustainability and leads to gaps in evaluation, staffing, and outreach.

*Limited Evaluation and Outcome Tracking*

Many programs lack the resources or infrastructure to collect consistent quantitative and qualitative data. Without strong data systems, it becomes more difficult to demonstrate program impact, secure and sustain funding, and drive continuous quality improvement.

Moreover, data specific to Colorado’s teen father population is severely lacking, making it difficult to assess service needs, program effectiveness, and gaps in programming. As a provider network, we must do what we can to improve data collection and evaluation capacity.

More comprehensive data illustrating the needs of teen fathers in Colorado is essential to providers’ ability to access and sustain program funding, assess program effectiveness, and inform father-friendly program design. The Teen Parent Collaborative is actively working to improve data collection practices in the state and is engaged in an ongoing network-wide data collection effort aimed at better understanding of the teen parent experience in Colorado. In doing so, we hope to support program administrators, policymakers, and providers in:

- Illustrating need to help secure and sustain program funding;
- Developing targeted, teen parent-specific fatherhood programming;
- Facilitating access to shared data systems and evaluation tools; and
- Informing training and technical assistance that incorporates high-quality implementation science practices.



*Outreach Barriers and Social Norms*

Recruiting fathers—particularly non-resident fathers, teen fathers, and fathers of color—remains a challenge due to:

- Longstanding biases portraying fathers as peripheral caregivers or “deadbeat dads;”
- Systems that inadvertently exclude or discourage father involvement; and
- Fathers’ own negative experiences with service systems such as child support or child welfare.

As a result, the policy and provider community in Colorado must work to promote equity and inclusion for fathers, especially teen fathers who are most likely to lack access to relevant supports.

Research and system leaders emphasize that equity-centered father engagement must be foundational. This includes fostering a provider community that:

- Challenges stereotypes and biases about fathers—especially fathers of color, young fathers, and nonresident fathers;
- Ensures that program materials, outreach, and environments are father-inclusive and culturally responsive; and
- Developing policies that value fathers as equal partners, regardless of marital status or custodial arrangements.

*Service Fragmentation*

Fatherhood needs span multiple systems: early childhood, child welfare, workforce development, child support, mental health, domestic violence, and education. Lack of coordination creates service gaps, complicates systems navigation and creates access barriers, and can result in huge disparities in supports available to families in one part of Colorado compared to another.

*What can providers do to improve this situation?* Promoting institutionalization and sustainability of father-engagement strategies by embedding father-friendly practices across all family support programs can reduce access barriers and streamline the systems-navigation needed to obtain services.

Rather than isolating fatherhood work into siloed programs, embedding father engagement strategies into existing services leads to stronger results. Effective approaches include:

- Integrating father-focused enhancements into home visiting, early childhood programs, and maternal health initiatives;
- Training staff on father engagement, communication, and co-parenting strategies; and
- Offering flexible hours, male-friendly spaces, and relationship-based recruitment.

### Conclusion

Fatherhood programs across Colorado are essential drivers of child well-being, family stability, and community resilience. When fathers are supported, engaged, and valued, children thrive. Providers and policymakers across the state must seize the opportunity to strengthen supports for young fathers, expanding access to effective programming and embedding father engagement into every family-serving system.

