



U.S. Department of Health  
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# NRFC Tips for Fatherhood Professionals

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[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

## TIPS FOR RETAINING PARTICIPANTS IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS WISDOM FROM THE FIELD

### Background

No single strategy exists for retaining participants in fatherhood programs. Nevertheless, ensuring that participants stay involved in these programs is important so that they can reap benefits from the services that these programs provide. Programs should always consider the attendance barriers facing program participants and the interests of their target population when deciding on appropriate retention measures. This brief presents 13 tips for retaining participants in fatherhood programs. As a general rule of thumb, when implementing these tips be sure to follow the guidelines of your federal funding agency, as federal funds may not be allowable for some of these activities.

### What is Retention?

**Retention**—in the context of fatherhood programs—refers to the extent to which participants continue their involvement in a program. Although sustained involvement is advantageous, there is no ideal duration for participation, because the amount of time that fathers attend a program varies by their individual needs.

### Remember the 13 Tips for Retaining Fathers In Programs

- Tip 1:** Select effective program staff.
- Tip 2:** Offer Incentives.
- Tip 3:** Provide transportation to and from the program.
- Tip 4:** Offer organized child care.
- Tip 5:** Provide activities for the fathers' spouses or partners.
- Tip 6:** Provide job placement and preparation opportunities.
- Tip 7:** Provide leadership opportunities for fathers within the program.
- Tip 8:** Make sure curricula are culturally sensitive and applicable to fathers.
- Tip 9:** Create a "buddy" system.
- Tip 10:** Set up flexible scheduling.
- Tip 11:** Make social services accessible.
- Tip 12:** Create a welcoming program environment for fathers.
- Tip 13:** Have participants commit to regular program participation at the start.

*Take Time to Be a Dad Today*

## Tips for Keeping Fathers Involved in Fatherhood Programs

### Tip 1: Select effective program staff.

Studies report that fathers appreciate and respond well to staff that respect and support them. Supportive staff members are enthusiastic; believe in the program's mission; and are comfortable talking with fathers.<sup>i,ii</sup> Such staff members also maintain ambitious yet realistic goals for program participants.<sup>iii, iv</sup> In building positive staff-participant interactions, programs have found the following strategies helpful:

- *Hire staff with related work experience.* Programs have found it useful to hire staff members with prior experience working with populations similar to that of fathers in the program.<sup>v</sup> Some programs seek staff with previous experience with different aspects of the program. For example, the Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness (PEACE) Program, a parenting program that operates nationwide, looks for leaders with 10 or more years of parenting program experience.<sup>vi</sup>
- *Ensure that staff is well trained.*<sup>vii</sup> Studies have found that programs often seek energetic staff members who are able to counsel fathers.<sup>viii</sup> Some programs find it helpful to provide staff training.<sup>ix</sup> Potential training topics may include: how to be culturally sensitive; how to engage participants; how to facilitate a group; how to put participants at ease (e.g., engaging them in conversation and encouraging them to keep the lines of communication open); and how to work with social services, such as Friends of the Court.<sup>x,xi, xii, xiii</sup> Programs may consider conducting their training or trading information on “best practices” in collaboration with other community organizations.<sup>xiv</sup>
- *Recruit staff that is able to connect with fathers.*<sup>xv</sup> Recruiting staff members who have similar experiences and backgrounds as that of fathers in the program and can help staff easily relate to program participants and put them at ease.<sup>xvi, xvii</sup> Fathers who drop out of programs often cite not having a staff member whom they could relate to as one of the key reasons they stopped attending.<sup>xviii</sup> To address this concern, Young Dads, a predominantly African-American teen fatherhood program, used social workers who were accustomed to communicating and interacting with young fathers.<sup>xix</sup> Other programs recruit former program participants as program mentors, group facilitators, or to fill other staff roles.<sup>xx</sup>
- *Aim for a relatively high staff-to-participant ratio.*<sup>xxi</sup> Evidence shows that the more one-on-one attention fathers receive from staff members, the higher the retention rate of fathers in the program.<sup>xxii</sup>

## Tip 2: Offer Incentives.

Fathers face multiple challenges—financial hardships, limited education, unstable relationships, legal issues, and unemployment—and offering incentives can help motivate fathers to stay involved in programs.<sup>xxiii, xxiv, xxv</sup> Some incentives may include:

- *Stipends.* Studies show that stipends can help attract and retain men in fatherhood programs.<sup>xxvi</sup> Financial incentives could be offered for program attendance, meeting program requirements, or for attending skill/career-building training sessions.<sup>xxvii</sup> For example, the Dads for Life program based in Maricopa County, Arizona, provided a \$20 stipend to fathers for participating.<sup>xxviii</sup>
- *Refreshments.* Providing meals or snacks for program participants and their families is another way to motivate fathers to continue their participation in programs.<sup>xxix, xxx</sup> Some programs hold family picnics to cultivate positive relationships among program staff, participants, and their families.<sup>xxxi</sup> For example, the New York Human Resources Administration and the Department of Youth and Community Development held a Father’s Day picnic to celebrate New York fathers who participated in fatherhood programs.<sup>xxxii</sup> The event featured lunch, carnival games, and live entertainment. Please be sure to always follow the rules of your federal funding agency, as federal funds may not be allowable for some of these activities.
- *Certificates of completion.* For some participants, receiving a certificate of completion can also make sustained attendance in a program worthwhile. The Detroit One-Stop Fatherhood Program, for example, uses its last session as a “program graduation.” During the session, participants receive certificates of completion and have the opportunity to speak to other fathers about the impact the program has had on them.<sup>xxxiii</sup>
- *Academic credit.* Offering high school or college credit for fatherhood program participation can also spur fathers to stay involved.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Compu-Dad project, for example, teaches fathers how to rebuild computers, and the project’s partnership with a local high school allows Compu-Dad to offer fathers high school credit for class participation.<sup>xxxv</sup>

## Tip 3: Provide transportation to and from the program.

Research has found that a lack of transportation is one of the main reasons that fathers do not participate in programs over time.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Thus, some programs have found providing adequate transportation to and from the program helpful in retaining program participants.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Colorado’s Be A Man! fatherhood program, for example, provides transportation to any fathers who request this service.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Similarly, the Detroit Fatherhood Program offers bus tokens to participants needing transportation.<sup>xxxix</sup>

#### Tip 4: Offer organized child care.

Fatherhood programs that offer organized child care with age-appropriate activities for children are also successful at retaining participants.<sup>xi</sup> Child care not only allows participants to bring their children while they attend the program, but children also motivate their fathers to keep coming.<sup>xli</sup> In order to identify age-appropriate activities for children at a fatherhood program site, it is important to consider both the age and interest levels of children.<sup>xlii, xliii</sup>

- *Young children (ages 0-6):* Young children enjoy performing arts (e.g., theater, dance, and music), computer games, sit-down games, and sports-related activities.<sup>xliv, xlv</sup> Some appropriate activities for younger children could include working on art projects, singing nursery rhymes, being engaged in academic enrichment (e.g., shape, color, letter, number, or word recognition games or activities or having children listen to and discuss a story), playing board games, or participating in an athletic game, such as kickball.
- *School-age youth (ages 7-12):* Middle school-aged youth are interested in academic enrichment activities, Web design, organized sports, games, homework help, higher education/career preparation, computer time, independent reading time, and having time to socialize with each other and to watch television or movies.<sup>xlvi</sup> Some specific activities could include participating in sports (e.g., karate, basketball, soccer, or gymnastics), receiving tutoring or homework assistance, creating an online scrapbook, participating in science experiments, playing board or card games, and listening to remarks by a guest speaker from a career of interest to youth.
- *Adolescents (ages 13+):* Older youth find the following activities engaging: leadership opportunities (e.g., helping to plan activities), internship or job preparation opportunities, organized sports, sit-down games, academic or arts enrichment, and opportunities to socialize.<sup>xlvii, xlviii, xlix</sup> Activities may include planning a community service project, a theatrical performance, or spoken word event; learning how to write a résumé or to communicate at a job interview; or engaging in physical activities (e.g., playing basketball or soccer or preparing for a dance performance).

In addition to providing child care, fatherhood programs may want to consider allowing youth to participate in some of the program sessions. Youth participation can provide the opportunity for fathers to practice their parenting skills. For example, if a program is designed to improve fathers' interactions with their children, father-child activities could include having fathers talk about school or relationships with teenagers, working on an art project or a puzzle with school-age children, or singing songs and reciting nursery rhymes to infants.

### **Tip 5: Provide activities for the fathers' spouses or partners.**

In addition to providing activities for children, it is helpful to offer group activities for the spouses or partners of fathers involved in your program.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests that the attitudes of spouses and partners can influence fathers' participation in programs.<sup>li,lii</sup> Thus, fatherhood programs should consider offering either corresponding mother programs or joint parent-partner programs, so that partners can positively influence fathers' participation in programs. Research also shows that mixed-gender parenting classes can help improve parents' abilities to support each other and their children.<sup>liii</sup> Your program may want to consider offering a version of the fatherhood program for mothers or partners.

### **Tip 6: Provide job placement and preparation opportunities.**

The most requested service of fathers attending fatherhood programs is help securing a job.<sup>liv,lv</sup> Thus, providing job placement, job preparation, and/or internships can help motivate fathers to continue attending fatherhood programs. Research also shows that education, income, and employment influence fathers' involvement.<sup>lvi</sup> For example, Detroit's One-Stop Fatherhood Program offers its fathers help with job-search skills, job training, and career advancement and education opportunities.<sup>lvii</sup> The Georgia Fatherhood Program also works in conjunction with the Department of Labor to help program participants find jobs.<sup>lviii</sup>

### **Tip 7: Provide leadership opportunities for fathers within the program.**

Offering fathers leadership opportunities within the program also helps retain program participants.<sup>lix</sup> Fathers feel more comfortable and willing to open up in "father-led, father only" program settings.<sup>lx</sup> For example, allowing fathers to lead a discussion can empower them and create an environment in which they feel comfortable participating. Additionally, allowing fathers to contribute to program planning (e.g., helping to develop a recruitment event, social activity, or seminar on a topic of their choice) can increase their feelings of ownership and investment in a program, as well as ensure that programs fit fathers' interests and needs.<sup>lxi,lxii</sup> Another way to provide leadership opportunities for fathers is to partner with an area school or after-school program, where fathers can serve on a parent council or governing board.<sup>lxiii</sup>

### **Tip 8: Make sure curricula are culturally sensitive and applicable to fathers.**

The key to retaining fathers in programs is to ensure that the curricula are culturally sensitive and relevant to the fathers attending.<sup>lxiv</sup> Some programs encourage adapting certain aspects of the curriculum to meet the cultural needs of fathers, without changing

the core curriculum components.<sup>lxv</sup> Even though program content rarely changes, groups do spend more time on topics that they consider especially relevant to their participants.<sup>lxvi</sup> For example, groups with immigrant majorities spend more time on U.S. laws, because staff found that immigrant fathers were typically unfamiliar with these laws.<sup>lxvii</sup> Spanish or Samoan is used to accommodate non-English speaking fathers.<sup>lxviii</sup> Some groups incorporate greater use of videotapes, transparencies, and role playing, because they found that their participants were more receptive to material that used these teaching methods.<sup>lxix</sup> To ensure that your program remains relevant, it helps to periodically follow up with fathers.<sup>lxx</sup> Some programs have used seminars or small groups to conduct follow-ups to ensure that program materials remain relevant to men.<sup>lxxi</sup>

### **Tip 9: Create a “buddy” system.**

Dividing program participants into small groups or pairs (“buddies”) can encourage participants to continue to attend and can help provide additional peer support to fathers.<sup>lxxii</sup> Buddies can also help update fathers who may miss a session.<sup>lxxiii, lxxiv</sup> The buddy system and small groups can help fathers build new friendships, gain self-confidence, and become more comfortable interacting in other social settings.<sup>lxxv</sup> Small-group leaders often encourage, guide, and respect group members, and are non-judgmental toward them. This pattern of behavior can foster an atmosphere of mutual trust and consideration within the group.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

### **Tip 10: Set up flexible scheduling.**

With work and other responsibilities, it is often difficult for fathers to find time for fatherhood programs.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Effective fatherhood programs schedule programs and activities at the times that fathers are available to meet (e.g., around work and transportation schedules).<sup>lxxviii</sup> Holding programs in the evenings or on weekends makes activities more accessible to fathers and also promotes fathers’ attendance.<sup>lxxix</sup> The Louisiana Low-Income Fatherhood Program accommodates fathers’ schedules by meeting individually with participants to devise an attendance requirement, or a realistic amount of time each father can devote to fatherhood program participation.<sup>lxxx</sup>

### **Tip 11: Make social services accessible.**

Research suggests that supporting fathers in their various roles is one of the most effective components of fatherhood programs.<sup>lxxxi</sup> Making social services (e.g., children and family services, legal and health services, substance abuse support) easily accessible helps to meet fathers’ needs and addresses issues that often prevent fathers from participating in programs.<sup>lxxxii, lxxxiii, lxxxiv</sup> The Detroit One-Stop Fatherhood Program,

for example, assesses fathers' social services needs during intake interviews. Then, on the basis of the findings, caseworkers work individually with fathers to address any challenges or problems.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Programs may also partner with a local social services agency to provide services. Together the fatherhood program and social services agency can present a seminar or otherwise help fathers to have easy access to a social service before, during, or after program participation. For example, Virginia's Department of Child Support Enforcement has partnered with the Second Chances fatherhood program to provide fathers with information about their child support rights and responsibilities.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Similarly, the Massachusetts Father Friendly Initiative and Department of Revenue work together to tailor a fatherhood program that offers interviewing opportunities with potential employers.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

### **Tip 12: Create a welcoming program environment for fathers.**

Fathers will be more likely to participate in programs and stay involved in them if they feel comfortable in the program setting. Meetings should be held in a father-friendly, nonclinical, relaxed place.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Programs might want to post positive images of men and fathers on the walls.<sup>lxxxix</sup> And there should be frequent communication between staff members and program participants.<sup>xc</sup>

### **Tip 13: Have participants commit to regular program participation at the start.**

Some fatherhood program topics build upon each another.<sup>xc</sup> As a result, programs may want to require fathers to commit to regular attendance at the beginning of the program in an effort to maximize program benefits.<sup>xcii</sup> An early program commitment can also help some programs retain participants.<sup>xciii</sup>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAMS

The following resources offer strategies for retaining fathers in programs:

- *Road to Fatherhood: How to Help Young Dads Become Loving and Responsible Parents*. Morris, Jon. (2002). Buena Park, CA: Morning Glory Press.
- *A Guide to Strengthening Fatherhood in Your Community: Moving from Inspiration to Implementation*. National Fatherhood Initiative. (2007). Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative. Available at:  
[http://www.fatherhood.org/iwwida.pvx?:products\\_no\\_tree?cat=BOOKS?comp=NFI](http://www.fatherhood.org/iwwida.pvx?:products_no_tree?cat=BOOKS?comp=NFI).
- *The importance of fathers in the healthy development of children*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox, authors. (2006). Available at: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/fatherhood.pdf>.

Other online resources include:

- **National Fatherhood Initiative** offers fatherhood program curriculum materials, including those in Spanish, at: [https://www.fatherhood.org/browse\\_social\\_solutions.asp](https://www.fatherhood.org/browse_social_solutions.asp). The National Fatherhood Initiative also offers its own staff training sessions. More information on training can be found at: <https://www.fatherhood.org/fathercheckup.asp>.
- **Native American Fatherhood and Families Association** offers a fatherhood program (Fatherhood is Sacred) - <http://www.nativeamericanfathers.org/program.html>) and training ([http://www.nativeamericanfathers.org/news\\_events.html](http://www.nativeamericanfathers.org/news_events.html)).
- **RuralFathers.com** shares age-appropriate activities for fathers to participate in with their children, fatherhood program lessons, staff training ideas, and additional fatherhood program resources. See: <http://www.ruralfathers.com>.
- **Fathers Network** offers fatherhood program resources, staff training information, and parenting articles at: <http://www.fathersnetwork.org>.
- **The Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum** provides a discussion-oriented style of teaching fathers positive social behaviors. Curriculum materials are available at: <http://www.mdr.org/publications/40/introductiontoc.pdf>.

For structured activities for young children, the following resources are helpful:

- **Gayle's Preschool Rainbow** offers an assortment of academic enrichment and arts and crafts activities for young children at: <http://www.preschoolrainbow.org/preschoolers.htm>.
- **Kaboose Funschool** provides a variety of age-appropriate computer games for preschool through sixth-grade children. The bottom of the Web site's home page allows you to select the appropriate age group for the computer games. Visit: <http://funschool.kaboose.com/index.html>.

For structured activities for middle school-age children, the following resources are useful:

- **Zeeks** has online computer games for middle school-age children at: <http://games.zeeks.com/games.php?trnstl=1>.
- **Middle School Activities** outlines fun science experiment ideas from A-Z. See: <http://www.reachoutmichigan.org/funexperiments/quick/middlesch.html>.

For adolescent youth, the following resource is helpful:

- **Ten Group Games and Activities for Teens** shares ten games and enrichment activities for teenage youth at: <http://www.cplrmh.com/teenactivities.html>.

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## NRFC Tips for Fatherhood Professionals Tips for Retaining Participants in Fatherhood Programs



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