



How to Train Female Staff to Effectively Engage Fathers

*A Guide for Any Organization
Serving Fathers and Families*

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**National
Fatherhood
Initiative®**

About National Fatherhood Initiative

Creating a world in which every child has a 24/7 Dad.SM

National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) is the nation's leading non-profit organization working to end father absence. Underlying many of society's most pressing challenges is a lack of father involvement in their children's lives.

Our Mission

National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) transforms organizations and communities by equipping them to intentionally and proactively engage fathers in their children's lives.

Our Vision

National Fatherhood Initiative's vision is for every child to grow up with an involved, responsible, and committed father.

To see more about our mission, our partners, our impact, and how we can help you engage fathers, please visit www.fatherhood.org

For fatherhood and family resources, including curricula, resources, and other helpful materials, please visit www.fathersource.org.

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Introduction

You undoubtedly have female staff that work in your organization and interact with fathers and families to deliver your services. It may come as a surprise to you, however, that some female staff can have objections to involving fathers. Let us explain.

National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) has heard on numerous occasions that although an organization wants to provide resources and services aimed at fathers, there are times when they find that female staff have either overt, or unconscious, mental and emotional barriers that discourage them from encouraging father involvement. These barriers can affect your organization's ability to effectively serve fathers because this staff is on the frontline of serving families. In some cases, female staff will be aware that they have these barriers, but in many cases they are not. Our goal is to help you uncover these barriers where they exist, and help staff to overcome them, so that your organization can be as effective as possible in serving fathers and families.

This guide will:

- ✓ Help you understand some of the challenges female staff may face in working effectively with fathers and how important it is to assess the father-friendliness of your organization's culture so you can be successful in serving fathers.
- ✓ Provide approaches for training staff that will raise awareness of attitudes among female staff that may hinder your organization's work with fathers.
- ✓ Highlight some resources to help female staff more effectively engage fathers in programs and services and ways that NFI staff can assist in that effort.



The Female Face of Social Services

According to the United States Department of Labor, 81 percent of social workers in America are women.¹ Given that most social service programs and organizations focus on women and not men, it's not surprising that the social service field is an overwhelmingly female one. When it comes to serving fathers, it's important to recognize some of the challenges an overwhelmingly female setting and culture can create when staff try to effectively engage fathers.

One of the primary reasons for the challenges female staff face in working effectively with fathers is the tendency of people to gravitate toward, spend time with, and be most comfortable around others who are similar. This fact extends to gender. Research in early childhood programs, for example, shows that women are more comfortable working with women.

Female social workers may unconsciously bring “baggage” from poor relationships they have with men and fathers in their own lives into their work with the men and fathers served by their organizations.²



This quite natural gender-based tension can extend to relationships between female social workers and the men and fathers their organizations serve. This tension can also be heightened by the personal histories women have with the men and fathers in their own lives. Female social workers may unconsciously bring “baggage” from poor relationships they have with men and fathers in their own lives into their work with the men and fathers served by their organizations.²

¹United States Department of Labor. *Quick stats on women workers 2010*. <<http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QS-womenwork2010.htm>>

²Fagan, J. (1996). Principles for developing male involvement programs in early childhood settings: a personal experience. *Young Children*, 51 (4) 64-71.

The Female Face of Social Services

(Continued)

Another critical contributing factor to this tension is the rapid rise in the past several decades in the number and proportion of households headed by single-mothers. Social workers are often unsure of how to effectively work with fathers in these families. The challenges these families present include:



- Tensions between mothers and fathers, especially when those relationships have a history of abuse or violence.
- Locating and maintaining contact with non-custodial and non-residential fathers.
- Lack of knowledge about the desire of most fathers to be involved in the lives of their children and the challenges these fathers face in becoming involved.
- Relationships mothers may have with men who are not their children's fathers (e.g. boyfriends who live with mothers) and how those relationships can complicate the relationships between mothers and the fathers, as well as, the relationships between the fathers and their children.
- Working with mothers who have children by multiple fathers.

All of these factors make it much easier for program staff to default to working primarily or exclusively with mothers and not reach out to fathers or other significant men in children's lives (e.g. father figures).³ Unfortunately, this reluctance to reach out can have negative consequences for mothers, fathers, and children. Mothers miss out on a healthier relationship with their children's fathers and, most important, the additional support fathers bring that will give mothers more energy to be better parents. Fathers miss out, too, especially on skill building opportunities that can help them be more involved, responsible, and committed fathers. Children miss out on the unique and irreplaceable role that both mothers and fathers bring to the parenting process. It also makes social service programs less effective than they can or should be.

³Wardle, F. (2007). Men in early childhood: fathers and teachers. *Early Childhood News*.

The Courage to Change

Changing the culture of an organization requires courage. Helping female staff to more effectively engage fathers often requires changing the culture of the organizations in which they work. This fact isn't an indictment of women in social services or the organizations that employ them: quite the contrary. Think, for example, how long it has taken for women to break into the male-dominated world of sports reporting and broadcasting. Only in recent years have women assumed major roles as sports reporters and anchors, and there is still a long way for them and the industry to go in establishing equity. Because social services were created primarily to focus on the well-being of women, mothers, and children, the need for this change in most social service agencies is simply an artifact of good intentions.

Changing the Culture of Social Service Organizations

The need for change to effectively serve fathers won't be obvious to everyone and may, in fact, be obvious to a very few. You may be one of the few people in your organization that sees the need for change to effectively serve fathers. You may encounter some or a lot of resistance.

To lay the groundwork for change and blunt resistance, use a calm, constructive, positive tone, and frame change in a way that will resonate with women.

- Focus on how change will benefit mothers, such as by increasing their ability to be good mothers through reduced stress and fewer financial worries that result from greater father involvement.
- Cast a vision of the positive effects of father involvement on children, such as increased graduation rates; increased mental, physical, and emotional health; and wholesome childhoods filled with wonderful experiences.
- Talk from the heart about the benefits of healthy father-child and father-mother relationships.
- Talk about how change will help the organization be more successful in pursuing its strategic and tactical objectives and mission.

Your capacity for diplomacy and measured responses to difficult questions about the need for and benefits of change will dictate the extent to which you can build trust among staff and that you have their and the organization's best interests in mind. At the same time, approach change with a sense of urgency and communicate that urgency to staff.

The Tools for Change

Entering any process of change without resources that facilitate change is like trying to build a house without wood, sheetrock, and a nail gun. NFI has tools that can help you facilitate change specifically related to serving fathers.

Since the late 1990s, NFI has helped social service agencies change their cultures through the assessment of an organization's culture and the attitudes of staff (at all levels of an organization) when it comes to working with fathers.



The primary tools NFI has used in this endeavor are [The Father Friendly Check-Up™](#) and the [Father-Readiness Network Assessment™](#). The check-up helps individual organizations assess how well they engage fathers. The latter—a service of NFI—helps entities, such as government agencies and national membership-based organizations, assess how well their entire networks engage fathers.

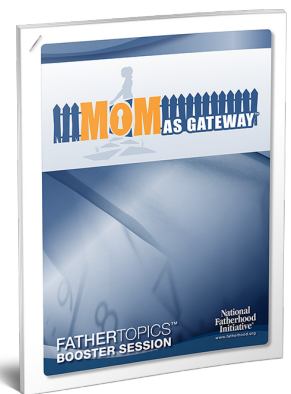
We highly recommend you use either or both of these resources to gauge readiness to engage fathers and to start the change process. Even if you are the only person who completes the [The Father Friendly Check-Up™](#), you need some idea of how much distance the organization must cover to become effective at serving fathers.

In addition to the check-up, some organizations have used two of our mother-focused resources—the [Mom as Gateway™](#) FatherTopics™ booster session and the [Understanding Dad™](#) program—to place an emphasis on helping female staff better understand fathers, fathers' importance, and, for those who have had challenges with men and fathers in their own lives, work through their personal issues with men and fathers. This creative use is an exciting development in efforts to change the culture of organizations to more effectively serve fathers. (Your organization can acquire both these resources at once in [this curriculum bundle](#).)

Mom as Gateway™ and Understanding Dad™

Many organizations deliver both the Mom as Gateway™ FatherTopics™ booster session and Understanding Dad™ to the mothers they serve, as both resources strengthen the relationships mothers have with the fathers of their children. NFI created these resources based on research that shows mothers often act as gatekeepers when it comes to fathers' access to their children and that fatherhood programs are more effective when they also engage mothers in helping them to understand the importance of father involvement.⁴ The response to these resources has been excellent. Hundreds of organizations run the booster session or the program, with some running both.

Mom as Gateway™ is a six-hour workshop with a focus on “maternal gatekeeping.” Maternal gatekeeping refers to a mother’s protective beliefs about the desirability of a father’s involvement in their child’s life, and the behaviors acted upon that either facilitate or hinder collaborative childrearing (often called “shared parenting” or “co-parenting”). Maternal gatekeeping occurs regardless of whether parents are married, divorced or unmarried, and regardless of the parents’ satisfaction with the relationship between them.



The objectives of Mom as Gateway™ are to: 1) increase mothers’ awareness of what gatekeeping is, how it operates, and how it is sometimes misused out of anger and hurt; 2) offer concrete examples that facilitate mothers’ understanding of the negative impact of excessive gatekeeping and the importance of supporting father involvement; and 3) engage mothers in exercises that facilitate the reduction of restrictive maternal gatekeeping behaviors that inhibit father engagement. Topics include: the role of the gatekeeper, power and control in relationships between men and women, and minimizing excessive gatekeeping.

⁴Cowan, P.A., Cowan, C.P., Cohen, N., Pruett, M.K. & Pruett, K.D. (2008). Supporting fathers’ involvement with kids. In J.D. Berrick & N. Gilbert (Eds.), *Raising Children: Emerging Needs, Modern Risks, and Social Responses*. Oxford University Press, 44-80

Understanding Dad™ is a group-based program with a focus on self-awareness and communication, which are both vital to improving the relationships between mothers and the fathers of their children. It consists of eight sessions (typically delivered in a one session per-week format), each lasting two to three hours, with the goal of accomplishing four objectives that are vital to improving the relationships between mothers and fathers:



- Increase mothers' knowledge, positive attitudes (e.g. toward fathers' involvement), and skills (e.g. communication) associated with improving their relationships with the fathers of their children.
- Increase mothers' awareness of the impact that their upbringing (e.g. their relationships with their own fathers) has had on their relationships with the fathers of their children and men in general.
- Increase mothers' understanding of the importance of fathers' involvement in the lives of their children.
- Increase positive interactions between mothers and the fathers of their children.

The program covers topics that help mothers gain a better understanding of their life as a mother, the impact of their own father and mother on their lives (e.g. how the relationships with their own parents shape their view of men and the fathers of their children), the effects on children of the mothers' view of their children's fathers, and the importance of father involvement. After they raise their self-awareness, the program shifts toward communication by examining, for example, how to better listen and communicate.

NFI worked with two organizations to pilot Understanding Dad™, one in Coshocton County, OH (Family P.A.C.T. Center) and the other in Allegheny County, PA (Allegheny Intermediate Unit). Researchers at Temple University (Philadelphia, PA) conducted an evaluation of the pilot and concluded that the program is effective. (You access the [report here](#).)

So, why did we just tell you all of that?

Using Mom as Gateway™ & Understanding Dad™ to Train Female Staff

Ironically, one of the two organizations that piloted Understanding Dad™ with the mothers they served also offered it and Mom as Gateway™ to the mothers on staff. That they offered both to staff came as a welcome surprise to NFI. It raised our awareness that other organizations might have done the same with the workshop, program, or both. We learned that they have, and so can you.

There are a number of approaches with these resources that you can take to enhance your female staff's motivation and skills to effectively engage fathers. Here are a few recommendations, but don't be limited by them. You may find that your organization, because of its culture, requires a different approach.

Approach #1 : The Mom as Gateway™ Immersion Approach.

Because you can deliver Mom as Gateway™ in only six hours, take your staff through the full workshop as if they were mothers served by your organization. Conduct the entire workshop in one day or spread it over two (e.g. three hours per day) or three days (e.g. one session per day). Consider integrating it into a staff training/in-service schedule, but don't let too much time separate the segments of the training. Too much time between segments of the training (e.g. a month or more) will hinder learning. Regardless of how you decide to immerse staff, simply follow the step-by-step facilitation instructions found in the Mom as Gateway™ Facilitator's Manual.

APPROACH #1

Approach #2 : The Mom as Gateway™ Abbreviated Approach.

If you can't conduct the entire workshop, review the Mom as Gateway™ Facilitator's Manual and pull out key concepts to present during one or more staff trainings. You could create a visually engaging presentation (e.g. using PowerPoint®) and handouts. If you have time, facilitate one of the sessions in the workshop that you think would have the most impact on staff. You could also, depending on time, select one of the three sessions (i.e. several activities) to facilitate in its entirety. If you can select only one of the sessions, we recommend Session One because it helps staff define gatekeeping, understand how gatekeeping applies to childcare, and reinforces alternatives to restrictive gatekeeping.

Approach #3 : The Understanding Dad™ Immersion Approach.

Take staff through the eight sessions of the program. You could conduct one session per week for eight weeks (the most common periodicity) or twice a week for four weeks. We don't recommend more than two times per week because it doesn't allow enough time for the learning to "soak in." Two sessions per week requires four to six hours of time and includes a lot of content for mothers to absorb. That said, if you have an opportunity to conduct it over an entire weekend or a couple of weekends—during which staff would be completely focused on it without distraction—consider that option as well. Regardless of how you decide to immerse staff, simply follow the step-by-step facilitation instructions found in the Understanding Dad™ Facilitator's Manual.

Approach #4 : The Understanding Dad™ Abbreviated Approach.

If you can't conduct the entire program, review the Understanding Dad™ Facilitator's Manual and select as many sessions as you have the ability and time to conduct that you think would have the most impact on staff. Regardless of how many sessions you select, we recommend you include Session One: My Life as a Mom. If you can't conduct at least one session, review the Understanding Dad™ Facilitator's Manual and pull out key concepts to present during one or more staff trainings. You could create a visually engaging presentation (e.g. using PowerPoint®) and handouts.

Approach #5 : The Dual Immersion Approach.

Conduct the workshop and program in their entirety. This approach is, clearly, the most comprehensive. Conduct sessions on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to cover the combined 11 sessions in three months or less. While you can start with either Mom as Gateway™ or Understanding Dad™, we recommend starting with Mom as Gateway™ because its focus on maternal gatekeeping provides an excellent framework for staff to prepare for the more in-depth training in Understanding Dad™. Indeed, the organizations that have used both resources report that starting with Mom as Gateway™ leaves mothers asking for more and, as a result, makes them more motivated to attend Understanding Dad™.

Approach #6 : The Dual Abbreviated Approach.

Conduct sessions from Mom as Gateway™ and Understanding Dad™ or simply pull out key concepts from each of them to create a presentation.

Regardless of the approach you take, a great perspective is that of treating staff no differently than if they were mothers served by your organization. Let them participate as mothers, not staff.



Understanding Dad™ and Mom as Gateway™ Bundle

Use this bundle to create a powerful 12-session program for staff that addresses moms' gatekeeping behavior in a more comprehensive way than either resource alone.

1. Start with the optional opening session in Understanding Dad™ as session one.
2. Follow it with the eight core sessions of Understanding Dad™.
3. End the program with the three sessions of Mom as Gateway™.



When staff goes through Understanding Dad™ before Mom as Gateway™, it helps them to be more receptive to the latter resource's laser focus on their gatekeeping behavior. After the Understanding Dad™ program helps staff reflect on how their upbringing affects how they relate to fathers, the importance of fathers to child well-being, and learn practical communication skills to help them more effectively interact with fathers, they're more open to addressing their gatekeeping behavior head on during the Mom as Gateway™ sessions.

Assistance from NFI

NFI can work with you to create or implement customized trainings, strategies, and approaches that will help your female staff to more effectively work with fathers. If you would like to discuss these options in more detail, please contact us at 301-948-0599 or info@fatherhood.org.

How to Order

For information on and to order and download Mom as Gateway™, [click here](#). For information on and how to order Understanding Dad™, [click here](#). For more information on how to order the bundle, [click here](#).