

A dark blue silhouette of a family consisting of a man, a woman, and a child, positioned on the left side of the slide. The man is on the left, the woman is in the center, and the child is on the right, leaning against the woman.Three horizontal lines of varying thickness, located in the top right quadrant of the slide.

Engaging the Whole Family... That Includes Fathers!

Sean Couch, BSc.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Learning Objectives

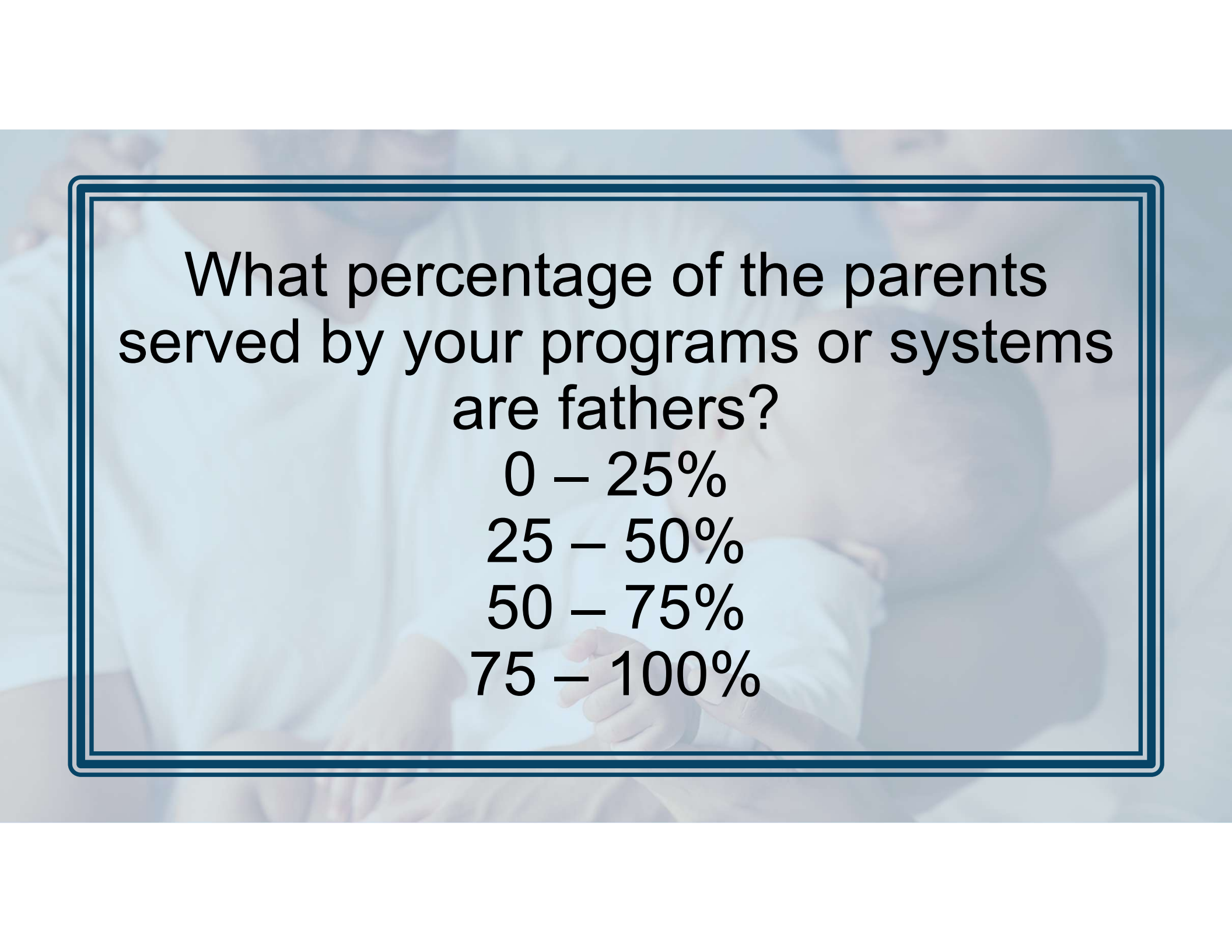
- Recognize the importance of including fathers in case planning and promoting father-child relationships
 - Learn strategies to engage fathers in treatment and services
 - Identify ways to strengthen father engagement across child welfare, substance use disorder (SUD) treatment, and court systems
-
-

1 in 4 children

**live without a father in
the home.**



(U.S. Census Bureau, 2025)



What percentage of the parents
served by your programs or systems
are fathers?

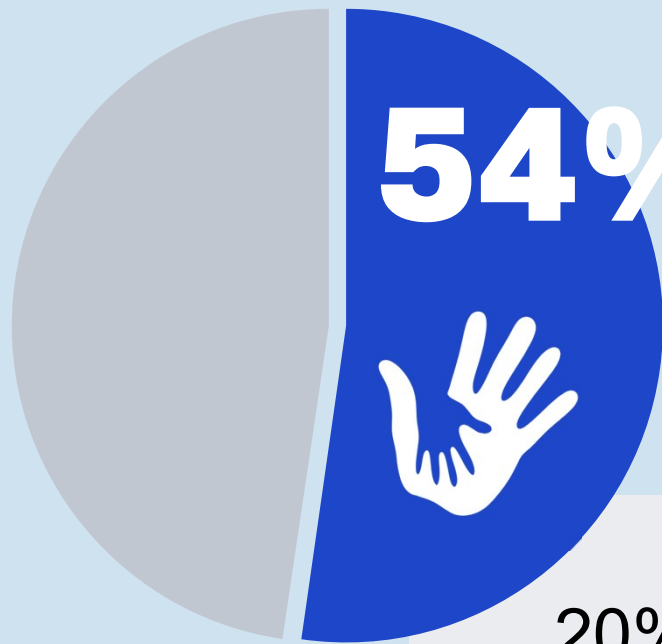
0 – 25%

25 – 50%

50 – 75%

75 – 100%

Fatherhood Status in Substance Use Disorder Treatment



54%

of men seeking substance use disorder treatment are the biological fathers of at least one child.

20% live with or have custody of their child



Increased Risks Associated with Father Absence on Children

Two times as likely to **drop out of school**

Two times as likely to **experience mental health challenges**

Four times as likely to **live in poverty**

10 times as likely to **abuse substances**

20 times as likely to be **incarcerated**

(National Fatherhood Initiative®, 2024)



Positive Effects of Father Involvement on Child Development & Well-Being

- Cognitive outcomes
- Self-esteem
- Overall academic achievement (higher grades, test scores)
- Empathy and other pro-social behavior

Increased

Decreased

- Alcohol and other substance use
- Depression in teens

(National Fatherhood Initiative®, 2007, 2025a;
Hochgraf et al., 2021; Karberg et al., 2019)

Effects of Father Involvement on Child Safety & Permanency Outcomes

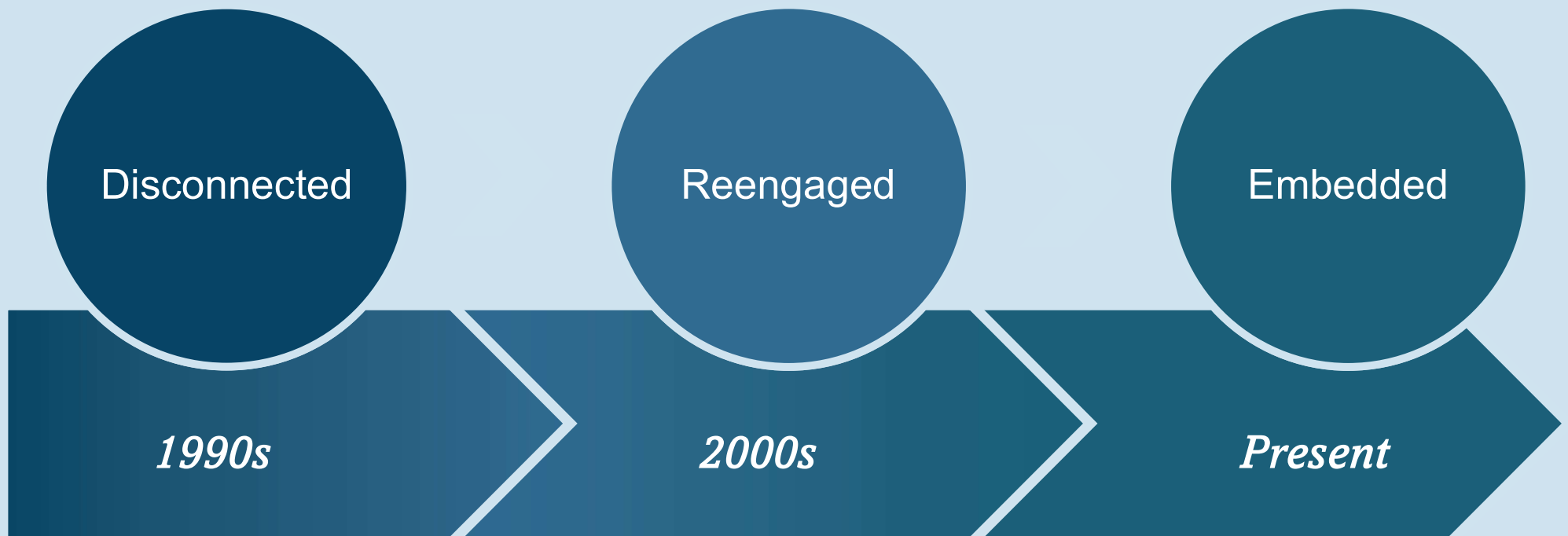
Father involvement is associated with:

- Shorter stays in foster care for children
- Greater likelihood of reunifications
- Lower likelihood of adoption and termination of parental rights
- Reduced risk of later maltreatment

(Malm et al., 2008)



Shifting Social Expectations & Roles of Fathers



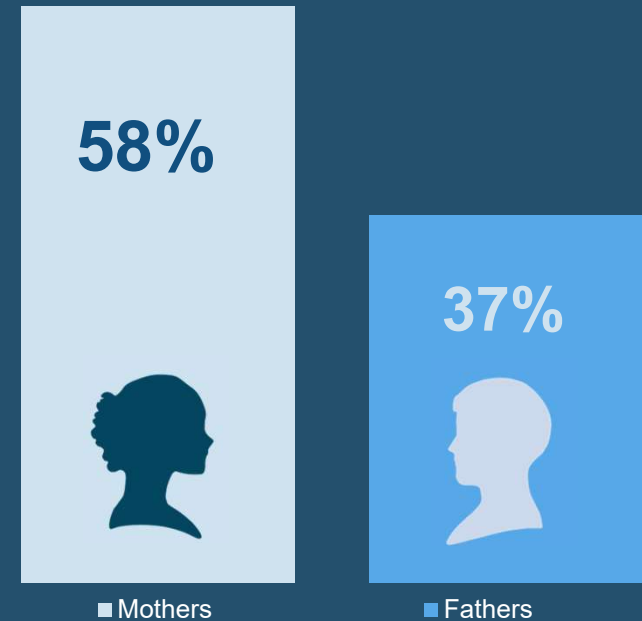
(U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008; Davidson et al., 2022; National Family Preservation Network, 2018; Administration for Children and Families, 2025)

Common Barriers to Father Engagement

- Cases follow the mother and child
- Practices or policies that limit contact
- Unknown or unable-to-locate father
- Individual perceptions and stereotypes
- Mutual fear or distrust

(Casey Family Programs, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d., 2024)

Monthly Child Welfare Caseworker Visits



(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020)

Father Experiences & Perceptions as Barriers to Engagement



- Distrust of the program or system
- Feeling misunderstood
- Fear of unfair treatment or punitive approaches
- Competing time priorities of work or school
- Challenging co-parenting relationship
- Lack of access to the child
- Unmet basic needs

(Marano et al., 2022; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013; Baumgartner et al., 2023)

Meeting Basic Needs to Build Strong Foundations

Affordable and Stable Housing:

- Invest in a housing resource specialist
- Refer fathers to housing assistance

Reliable Transportation:

- Provide gas cards and bus passes
- Partner with a car-services provider or a community ride-sharing program



Stable, Gainful Employment:

- Connect fathers to workforce development services
- Partner with local businesses and organizations

Mental and Physical Health, and Recovery:

- Train staff on health providers and insurance options
- Refer fathers to substance recovery programs and ensure coordinated support

(Marano et al., 2022)

Opportunities for Increasing Father Engagement



**Cross-System
Collaboration**



**Practices &
System Policies**



**Father-Friendly
Environments**



**Father's Role &
Responsibilities**



**Specialized
Services &
Supports**

Cross-System Collaboration



- ✓ Align efforts across child welfare, treatment, courts, and community partners to integrate father engagement across all services.

Use locator tools and interagency data to find and engage fathers.

Offer residential SUD treatment for fathers and their children.

Engage father-peer mentors or alumni to normalize involvement and model the role.

Braid funding to support identity-strengthening components like parenting curricula specific to fathers.

Coordinate shared messaging across systems that affirms fathers as essential caregivers.

Partner with community services and faith-based organizations to meet the needs of fathers.

(Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2024; Baumgartner et al., 2023; National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System, 2011; National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare, 2025)

Practices & System Policies

- Include questions about the father and contact information in initial child welfare report protocols
- Ask about fathers and paternal relatives as potential placement options
- Ensure child welfare agency has and follows a protocol for locating and engaging fathers
- Include questions about fatherhood role and parenting responsibilities during intake
- Ensure treatment matching to meet individual needs and characteristics
- Ensure quality legal representation
- Establish paternity quickly



- ✓ Identify and redesign organizational practices and system policies that may prevent or limit father engagement to remove barriers to father participation.

Examples of Questions to Engage Fathers



- What strengths do you bring as a dad (e.g., patience, humor, consistency)?
- What days and times work best for visits, services, or court requirements?
- Are there other paternal relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles) who play a role we should recognize?
- How does being a father affect your recovery goals and daily routines?
- What housing or financial supports would improve stability for you and your child?
- Which parenting topics would you find most useful (e.g., discipline, routines, communication)?
- What milestones are you excited to support next (e.g., school readiness, social skills, health)?



Father-Friendly Environments

- Consider messaging, images, and language that depict fathers and their interests.
 - Display images of dads actively parenting.
 - Include dads' success stories and quotes in materials.
 - Provide resources specific to dads' interests.
 - Use signs and language that apply to both mothers and fathers (e.g., “parents”, “mothers and fathers”).
 - Offer flexible hours.
- ✓ Assess environments using validated tools to ensure they are welcoming for fathers and reflect their interests.

Complete a Father Friendly Check-Up™

- Leadership Development
- Organizational Development
- Program Development
- Community Engagement



Visit the Fatherhood.org website to receive your FREE Father Friendly Check-Up™
<https://www.fatherhood.org/ffcu#ffcu>

(National Fatherhood Initiative®, 2025b)

Father's Role & Responsibilities



- Ensure family time in case plans to reinforce fathers' role as caregivers and father-child bond.
- Provide opportunities to develop and build skills in parenting, positive communication, conflict resolution, and child development.
- Support role clarity and co-parenting expectations.
- Connect fathers with peers and mentors to model positive fatherhood.
- Emphasize the benefits of fatherhood for men's well-being and recovery.



Fatherhood as a Cornerstone of Recovery

- Fatherhood provides purpose
- Role as a father strengthens recovery
- Father-focused supports matter
- Connection and belonging fosters family well-being

Specialized Services & Supports for Men



(National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, n.d., 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013; Hildago, 2023)

Specialized Programming for Fathers



- 24/7 Dad®
- Amazing Dads
- Dads Matter^{HV}
- Helping Men Recover
- Fatherhood is Sacred
- Nurturing Fathers
- Parenting Together Project (PTP)
- Supporting Father Involvement (SFI)

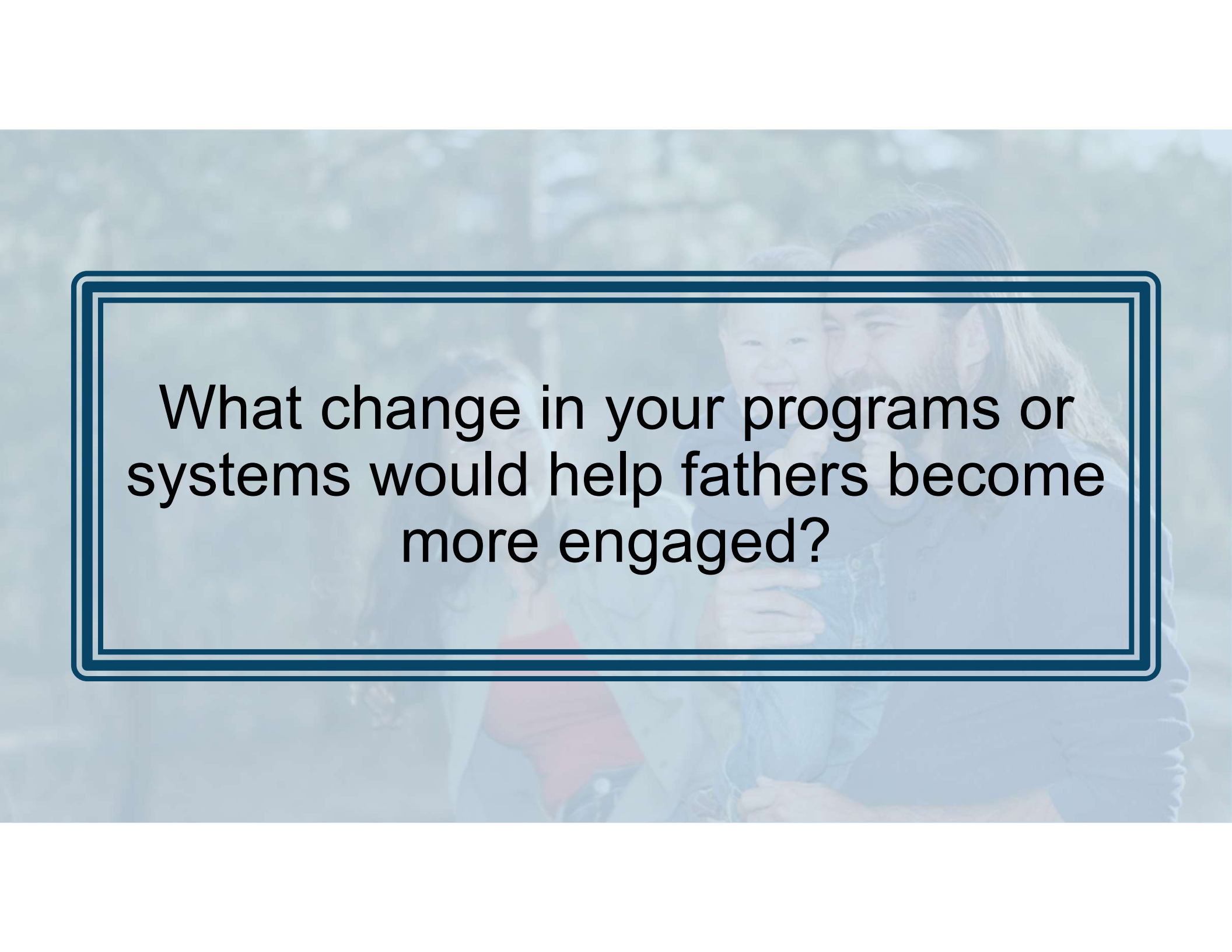
(National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare, 2021;
California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, n.d.)

Fatherhood Program Spotlight:

Moshe Moeller, Ph.D., Associate Program Director HERO Dads



(Children and Family Futures, 2023)



What change in your programs or systems would help fathers become more engaged?

A faint, light blue silhouette of a person in mid-air, jumping over a hurdle. The person's arms are extended forward, and their legs are bent, suggesting a running motion. The hurdle is positioned below the person's feet.

Audience Q & A



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Training and technical assistance to support collaboration and systems change



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RESOURCES

DISRUPTING STIGMA:

*How Understanding, Empathy, and
Connection Can Improve Outcomes
for Families Affected by Substance
Use and Mental Disorders*



Available @ <https://ncsacw.acf.gov/files/disrupting-stigma-brief.pdf>

ENGAGING PARENTS AND YOUTHS WITH EXPERIENCE



ENGAGING PARENTS AND YOUTHS

Strengthening Collaborative Policy and Practice
Initiatives for Families with Mental Health and
Substance Use Disorders



- Provides key considerations for collaboratives that are trying to engage parents who have been involved with the child welfare system with substance use disorder or other mental health challenges.
- Highlights considerations for those collaboratives trying to engage youth who have been in the foster care system.

Available @
<https://ncsacw.acf.gov/files/live-experience.pdf>



Implementing a Family-Centered Approach Series

This three-part series enables state, and agency-level collaborative partners to jointly improve systems, services, and outcomes for children and families affected by substance use disorders.



Module 1 | Overview of a Family-Centered Approach and Its Effectiveness

Module 2 | On the Ground—Family-Centered Practice

Module 3 | Collaboration to Support Family-Centered Practices at the County and State Level



Scan the QR code or click the link to access the series
@ <https://ncsacw.acf.gov/topics/family-centered-approach/fca-modules-series/>



National Center on
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and Child Welfare

IMPLEMENTING A FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH IN OUTPATIENT TREATMENT

Created for outpatient substance use disorder treatment providers to:

- ☐ Understand the essential ingredients of a family-centered approach
- ☐ Identify key partners needed to strengthen a family-centered approach
- ☐ Assess where your agency falls on the family-centered approach continuum
- ☐ Implement a family-centered approach using a four-step process



Scan the QR code or click the link to access the series @
<https://ncsacw.acf.gov/files/fca-in-outpatient-settings.pdf>



BUILDING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY SERIES

This seven-part series offers strategies that states and communities may use to create cross-system ***collaborative teams***, ***communication protocols***, and ***practice innovations***. These strategies aim to improve screening, assessment, and ***engagement for families*** affected by substance use disorders and involved with child welfare. We have organized the series into two clusters. The first provides a framework for establishing a collaborative team; the second highlights strategies to achieve timely access to treatment and support services for families.



Scan here to learn more!



AVAILABLE @ <https://ncsacw.acf.gov/topics/building-capacity/collaborative-capacity-series/>

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