

Applying Insights From Human Connection and Co-Regulation: Supporting Fathers in Human Services Programs

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OVERVIEW OF REPORT

Fathers play a unique and crucial role in their families, in their communities, and in numerous other important relationships they have throughout their lives. Many human services programs offer support for fathers and their families, necessitating exploration of how programs support fathers across different service areas. Some programs focus on fatherhood specifically, for example, while others focus on the additional roles that men have in their community (e.g., partner, citizen, worker, student, community member, or business owner). Human services programs often focus on only one of these roles rather than taking a more holistic view of the myriad roles a father plays simultaneously, the relationships existing within those roles, and the father's overall wellbeing. Studying social connection and co-regulation to support fathers in their many roles can yield valuable and actionable lessons. In January 2021, the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) held a meeting with a multidisciplinary group of experts to explore connection and co-regulation in the context of fatherhood and father engagement, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for fathers and families. Meeting participants also identified opportunities for a relationship-based approach to support and engage fathers across human services programs. This short report describes the background that led to the meeting, summarizes the themes that arose from the meeting's discussions, and expands those themes with additional research review and reflection to identify opportunities for applying a connection-focused lens to support and engage fathers across human services agencies and programs.



A GATHERING TO REFLECT ON AND DISCUSS WAYS TO SUPPORT FATHERS IN HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMS

OPRE held a meeting to identify ways in which human services programs can support fathers' connection, co-regulation, and engagement. Participants included academic experts on human connection, family relationships, human development, co-regulation, and fatherhood; researchers and practitioners who work in a range of human services programs including Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood, Child Welfare, Home Visiting, and Early Childhood settings; and fathers who have lived experience in the context of human services programs. Federal staff from program offices representing a range of human services programs were also present in listening mode during whole group discussions to allow for maximum interaction between invited experts.

Through facilitated conversation in both whole group and smaller breakout groups, participants discussed research on human connection and loneliness as it relates to fatherhood and father engagement, explored the intersection of these topics with the [co-regulation framework](#) commissioned by OPRE and developed by Desiree Murray and colleagues (Murray et al., 2019), and identified research and practice opportunities to apply a relational lens to support and engage fathers across human services programs. Participants were very engaged, which resulted in rich conversations.

In this report, we (a) summarize the formative work done to explore the intersection of these areas and to inform the meeting with experts, (b) present overarching themes from the meeting, (c) offer additional reflection and research review to propose a relationship-focused vision to organize the barriers and opportunities for practice, and (d) outline priorities for future learning and research.



What is Co-Regulation?

Co-regulation is the interactive process by which caring adults:

- 1) provide warm supportive relationships
- 2) promote self-regulation through coaching, modeling, and feedback
- 3) structure supportive environments

(Murray et al., 2019)

WHY APPLY CONNECTION AND CO-REGULATION INSIGHTS TO FATHER-SERVING PROGRAMS?

Transforming Narratives About Fatherhood Into Connections, Strengths, and Resilience

Meaningful relationships and social connections are necessary in the human experience, and their significant benefits are well documented (Li & Julian, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; 2015; Osher et al., 2018). Similarly, the consequences of experiencing a lack of connection or unhealthy relationships are also well established (Garner & Yogman, 2021; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012). The science of early child development and attachment research underscores the essential role that early life relationships play in human development, pointing to the importance of positive relationships in buffering and healing trauma from adverse childhood experiences (Bethell et al., 2019). More recently, loneliness and lack of social connection have been recognized as major public health issues, enhancing our understanding that the fundamental human need for relationships goes beyond early development and extends throughout the full span of life (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Furthermore, the field of social neuroscience has helped us to better understand how relationships and connection with ourselves and others shape the way we experience the environment and how humans are wired to seek and affirm positive connection and belonging. The human need for connection is as important to our health and wellbeing as food and water, and threats to this

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need carry physiological consequences that manifest in our behavioral and physical health. A holistic synthesis of this research reveals opportunities for a relationship-based approach to supporting fatherhood and father engagement grounded in the science of human connection.

In order to recognize the needs and strengths of fathers in their relational connections, it is important to critically reexamine and reframe

common assumptions that have been made about fathers. There are two contrasting narratives about fatherhood in the United States. One is shaped by media portrayals, prejudices, and untested assumptions (some of which are reinforced by the human services system), which together form a distorted and pejorative image of fathers. The other is lived by actual fathers as they navigate their everyday caregiving, parenting, and community roles. We explore these contrasting narratives in subsequent paragraphs.

The role of fathers in the United States has evolved significantly in the twenty-first century (Cabrera et al., 2000). With the increasing cultural diversity of fathers and variations in fathers' circumstances (e.g., residential and nonresidential, married and divorced,

partnered and unpartnered), there is no one-size-fits-all definition of what constitutes a “successful father.” In addition to being important contributors to a family’s financial support, fathers have significantly increased their engagement in caregiving and their responsibility in children’s everyday lives—including having meals together, playing, or checking homework—even as their physical presence and availability has decreased (Cano et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 1985, 1987; Livingston & Parker, 2011, 2019). Research suggests that fathers are consistently able to overcome systemic challenges and inequities to be involved with their children and families. Among fathers who reside with their children, prior research suggests that Black fathers are more involved in the routine care of their young children than fathers of any other racial group (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Additionally, fathers with low incomes and fathers who do not reside with their children—despite facing numerous practical challenges and constraints—are also more involved with their families than what might be assumed by common stereotypes associated with their income level or residential status (Cabrera et al., 2004).

A large majority of fathers express pride and a sense of ownership in their fathering roles (Jones & Mosher, 2013; Livingston & Parker, 2011). Within the human services sector, fathers report a complex and comprehensive understanding of their roles. This includes, but goes far beyond, the child support baseline that has historically been assumed by human services agencies. In an extensive study involving nearly 600 fathers, fathers described their roles as including: providing a financially, physically, and emotionally safe environment; teaching and guiding; playing and caregiving; and providing emotional support (Summers et al., 2006). Through in-depth surveys and interviews, researchers found that being there for their children and taking an active role in raising children are of great importance to fathers.

All of these developments in fathers’ roles stand in sharp contrast to the persistently negative portrayal of fathers, particularly fathers of color, in the media. For example, Black fathers’ portrayal in news and opinion media distorts the proportion who are in poverty, on welfare, absent and uninvolved, and involved in criminality (Dixon, 2017). The overarching deficit-focused paradigm (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Marsiglio et al., 2000) and cultural stereotypes of “deadbeat dads” have been reflected in historic policies that have focused on securing child support and narrowed the aims of research toward documenting the negative impact of absent fathers versus the positive and reciprocal benefits of fatherhood. However, shifts toward more positive narratives and holistic supports for fathers and their families are emerging, as exemplified in the recent name change from ACF’s Office of Child Support Enforcement to Office of Child Support Services to reflect the program’s commitment to inclusive services for families.¹

Any father engagement effort can help highlight and uplift the fatherhood narrative to affirm fathers’ roles, contributions, and impacts on children, families, and communities. Reflecting on this body of work collectively, we recognize that measuring father involvement by absolute time spent together does not tell the full story. Relationships between fathers and children can be understood in both quantitative (e.g., time together) and qualitative (e.g., closeness and warmth) terms. Furthermore, an expanded conceptualization of fathers

¹ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/ocsevoiceblog/2023/06/new-name-reflect-our-family-centered-approach>

beyond biological parents to include adoptive parents, foster parents, and many other important male figures closely related to the child (e.g., grandparents, uncles, or other closely affiliated male figures) could more completely capture fathers in their roles. Even as we identify and address barriers to father engagement and create opportunities to affirm fathers' roles, it is critically important that we realign the assumptions and rationale behind program activities and strategies with actual lived narratives of increasingly diverse and actively involved fathers, and explicitly counter (or, at the very least, avoid reinforcing) the false and pejorative narratives about them. In accordance with the 2021 presidential executive order on advancing equity through the federal government (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021), HHS and ACF are prioritizing work to incorporate lived experience in policies,

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programs, and research, in recognition that incorporating this perspective is crucial to the rigor and relevance of our work.²

Human services programs can play an active role in reshaping the narrative around fathers and helping to heal and strengthen the personal connections fathers have in their lives. For example, OPRE studies of Responsible Fatherhood programs have found that the

desire to be a better father is one of the most common reasons why fathers seek out service programs (Avellar et al., 2021). Fathers enrolled in Responsible Fatherhood programs who participated in interviews as part of the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation shared that becoming a father was an important motivator for positive life changes and that they are often working to overcome life challenges, including low or unstable income or a history of trauma (Holcomb et al., 2015). Earlier personal experiences such as a lack of positive social connections and close relationships—particularly during childhood and adolescence—as well as historic and systemic barriers and various forms of prejudice and racism, may cause or contribute to trauma and other challenges experienced by fathers in fatherhood-focused and other human services programs (Holcomb et al., 2015; Pahigiannis & Curtin, 2021; Spielfogel et al., 2023). These stressful circumstances can pose challenges to important relationships in the fathers' lives and can complicate their efforts to secure and maintain employment (Holcomb et al., 2015). Contextual factors and barriers created by systems and institutions can also create challenges to participation in programs that support child and family wellbeing (Avellar et al., 2020; Spielfogel et al., 2023), leaving fathers frustrated in their efforts to achieve their own hopes and dreams.

Despite these challenges, fathers have been able to adapt to and navigate complex systems. In developing and providing supports for fathers to form and maintain meaningful connections, it is important to consider the full context of their lives and attend to and build upon their strengths and resiliencies. Fathers use longstanding sources of resilience, such as family support, to (1) create networks of care for their children (Coates, 2012; Summers et al., 2004; Roy et al., 2010), (2) find ways to expand social networks and establish alternative

² For example, see: [Engaging People with Lived Experience to Improve Federal Research, Policy, and Practice](#) and [Spotlight on Incorporating Youth Engagement and Lived Experience Into Child Welfare Practice](#).

channels of support for their parental needs (Mekhail et al., 2009; Roy & Dyson, 2010), (3) draw inspiration about fatherhood from spirituality (Coates, 2012; Letiecq, 2007; Roggman et al., 2002), (4) model the caregiving practices they admire about their fathers but also strive to correct what did not work (Beaton & Doherty, 2007; Coates, 2012; Coles, 2003; Forste et al., 2009), (5) maintain positive outlooks about future economic positioning even when experiencing financial instability (Gibson et al., 2020), and (6) find ways to stay involved in their children's lives even when relationships with their co-parent do not last (Carlson et al., 2008; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007). Furthermore, fathers who have low income or are from marginalized communities bring considerable resilience resources to the challenge of fatherhood in the context of chronic stress (Wilson et al., 2021).

Applying a Co-Regulation Framework to Strengthen Relationships and Supports for Fathers

"By focusing on the process of co-regulation, we shift from an emphasis on individual markers of resilience to a model that recognizes the importance of relationships as a context for healing and growth. This framework points to new, actionable strategies for promoting connection and increasing the impact of our programs. Though we may not use the same language in our everyday life, co-regulation is something we already do at work and in our personal lives that we can do more frequently and on purpose. Therefore, rather than asking service providers and participants to add yet another new 'thing' to their current practices, we can build on the good things people are already doing by strengthening co-regulation and making it more intentional."

(McKenzie et al., 2022)

For more than a decade, OPRE has worked to translate research on the long-term negative impacts of early adversity and chronic stress to human service programs (OPRE, n.d.). We have taken a strengths-based approach and applied lessons from the field of human development to identify which evidence-informed approaches would be most relevant. While much of our work in this area has focused on the role of caring adults in the positive development of children and youth (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017), we expect that what we are learning with those groups is relevant to the development of adults, including fathers served by human services programs.

Time and again, the ways in which relationships support positive development emerge as critical processes. In particular, we have highlighted the significance of the research demonstrating the important role of co-regulation in positive development (Murray et al., 2019, 2023). Co-regulation is the interactive process by which caring adults (1) provide warm, supportive relationships; (2) promote self-regulation through coaching, modeling, and feedback; and (3) structure supportive environments (Murray et al., 2019).

We expect that using this co-regulation framework will help us better understand how human services programs can best support fathers as well as emphasize relational contexts and structurally support relationship-focused approaches. Furthermore, we expect an intentional focus on co-regulation in the contexts of peer relationships and relationship to self might be particularly relevant for fathers.

Rethinking our Language to Ensure a Strengths-Based Orientation

A strengths-based approach is critical to reinforcing the concepts of self-regulation and co-regulation (Murray et al., 2023). Therefore, to effectively communicate and integrate the important principles of self-regulation and co-regulation in the context of engaging and supporting fathers, we need to avoid reinforcing stereotypical messages about perceived deficits of male caregivers. The word “regulation” in self-regulation and co-regulation can

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be concerning in the context of fathers because it is sometimes used synonymously with phrases such as “will power” and “self-control.” To say that a child or an adult needs to develop “self-control” or “self-regulation” can conjure up the negative stereotype of a person who is “out of control” or “unable to regulate themselves” and overlook the situational, relational, and social contexts that help shape individual behavior and development (Bailey et al., 2019; Burt,

2020). For example, when reflecting on the relevance of self-regulation for Native communities, Tsethlekai et al. (2018) noted that the words comprising the term “self-regulation” (i.e., “self” and “regulation”) are problematic, given inferences to a focus on individuals and the history of forced dominance of the federal government over tribes. Instead, Tsethlekai and colleagues offer a holistic model of self-regulation focused on interconnectedness, respect, balance, and future orientation for self and community.

Balancing Our Thermostat and Thermometer: An Explanatory Metaphor for Applying Co-Regulation Principles

To help convey the principles of co-regulation in the context of supporting fathers and their relationships, we introduce an explanatory metaphor of “balancing thermometer and thermostat.” Various versions of this metaphor can be found in pop culture and professional development communication materials for social-emotional development. For this report, we developed a specific version of the metaphor to convey the reciprocal processes involved in self-regulation and co-regulation between fathers and children and illustrate how these interactions build on relationships and strengths, occur in everyday settings, and include skills that can be strengthened with practice.

Just as the thermometer can tell the temperature of a person or a room, part of our social-emotional capacity as individuals is to be able to feel our own feelings and those of other people around us. We know when we are happy or upset, and we react when someone near us is happy or upset. This capacity for emotional understanding or awareness allows us to recognize our own emotional state or let another person know that we feel what they feel. This extends across the lifespan, applying to individuals at different developmental stages.

Having this thermometer capacity is a social-emotional strength that we each have as human beings. It is not the same idea as the stereotypical image of a reactive, out-of-control person.

What is an Explanatory Metaphor?

“Metaphors that rely on everyday objects or experiences can help us introduce unfamiliar issues or explain complex ones” ([FrameWorks Institute, 2020](#)). Explanatory metaphors have been helpful in communicating important ideas in human development for both children and adults. One popularized example is the metaphor of “[serve and return](#)” (as in any sports with back-and-forth volleys and turn-taking) developed by the Harvard Center on the Developing Child to vividly convey the dynamics of reciprocal adult-child interactions. When used appropriately, such metaphors can reduce complexity, promote understanding, and shift people’s mindsets and behaviors. Metaphors that have been used when describing self-regulation include how self-regulation can be strengthened like a “muscle” and taught like “literacy,” with systematic and intentional support provided across contexts.³

However, metaphors also have their pitfalls. In the context of communicating about families, some widely popularized metaphors fall short of balanced and strengths-based approaches to engaging families. The “[Thirty Million Word Gap](#)” metaphor, for example, was intended to draw attention to the need for early language opportunities for children who grow up in households with low incomes and associated chronic stressors. But its oversimplified focus on the number of words (Rowe & Zuckerman, 2016) heard by children across social classes inadvertently reinforced negative stereotypes of parents’ capacity to teach their children. Another example is the “[Toxic Stress](#)” metaphor, which was intended to draw attention to the long-lasting impact of [adverse childhood experiences](#) and chronic stress on children’s development (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). When it is overused in the absence of equally compelling descriptions of protective relationships and resources that exist in communities experiencing chronic stressors (Burstein et al., 2021), this metaphor conveys an unbalanced and overwhelmingly pessimistic outlook about children and adults in these communities.

For example, when a father feels the excitement of picking up their child from preschool, it shows on his face and in his body language. The child can also feel the excitement and reciprocate with their own facial expressions and body language. At that moment, the thermometers in both the adult and the child help them express and receive each other emotionally and strengthen their relational bond.

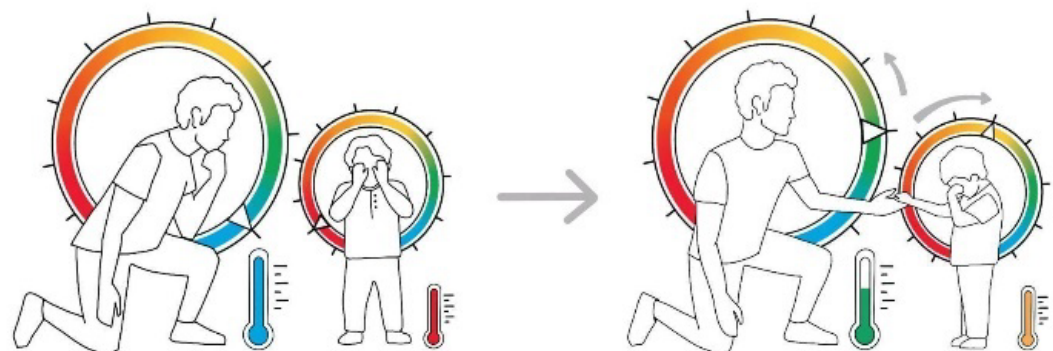
A thermometer, whose reading rises and falls as it reacts to the temperature of the body or a room, cannot adjust the temperature. There are situations where our automatic responses to our own perceived emotions or others’ feelings need intentional calibration. A thermostat is designed to actively adjust the temperature of a room for the comfort of everyone in it. Similarly, each of us has the regulatory capacity to adjust our emotional responses to the environment around us to be more helpful to ourselves and others. In most situations, our internal thermometer and thermostat work together. For example, when a child wakes up at night and cries, a father rushes to check on the child. The father may feel his heartbeat start to race while his brain is particularly attuned to the distress signals from the child. He can communicate with voice and body language that conveys genuine care and concern. That is the father’s emotional thermometer at work—it allows the father to read and react to the child’s emotional needs.

³ For example, see: [Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress: Foundations for Understanding Self-Regulation from an Applied Developmental Perspective](#)

This initial instinctive response often needs the support of the more deliberate and intentional calibration of the father's internal thermostat. For example, if the child remains inconsolable, not understanding why the child is crying and the exhaustion of frequently waking up at night may dial up the adult's emotional frustration. At that moment, the emotional temperatures continue to escalate between the child and the father. In one scenario, the father, not knowing how to help, may grow more impatient; the child, sensing the father's impatience, may grow more upset. Two thermometers, merely reacting to each other's escalating temperatures, can register and express emotions but not adjust easily. This is when the adult's more developed thermostat capacity becomes instrumental. When the father intentionally dials down his own emotional temperature, he might take a deep breath, hold the child closely, rock the child gently, talk or sing in a calm and steady voice, or lay a hand on the child's back just to say "I'm here for you" as he waits for the child to find comfort. The father is not only adjusting his own emotional temperature but also becoming a co-regulation resource for the child. The child acquires a sense of security and comfort that comes from the adult's presence (co-regulation) and learns to self-regulate based on the father's supportive responses. The same process can apply at different developmental stages. For example, an adolescent may experience stress and anxiety preparing to live independently for the first time. The father may also feel their own anxiety surrounding this change, may engage in self-soothing techniques to calm themselves down and help their child to manage their own stress.

In this way, our own internal thermometer (which reads how we feel) and thermostat (which adjusts how we react to what we feel) work in coordination (as illustrated in **Figure 1**). Much like an actual thermostat, which has a built-in thermometer, the coordinated system helps us to know how we feel and imagine how our children feel and then regulate ourselves to become a resource to our children. Meanwhile, as our children are growing, their internal thermostats become more effective through these simple, ordinary moments of shared joy and challenges.

Figure 1: Illustration of the Emotional Co-Regulation Process



On the left side, an upset child (marked by the red/high thermometer reading) needs support from a calmer and responsive adult (marked by the blue/cool thermometer reading). On the right side, the co-regulation process allows the adult to show emotional empathy (marked by the upward direction of the arrow on the adult's thermostat) and reach out in support to enable the child to gradually self-regulate (marked by the cooler/orange thermometer reading and the rightward direction of the arrow on the child's thermostat).

Applying the Metaphors of Thermostat and Thermometer Across the Lifespan

In adopting and extending this explanatory metaphor, two points are worth reiterating to avoid over-simplifications:

- **Our self-regulation and co-regulation depend on both thermometer and thermostat capacities, not either/or.** The capacity to feel our own and our children's feelings (the thermometer), even when these feelings may be negative or uncomfortable, is just as important as the capacity to adjust our own and our children's emotional states (the thermostat). It is unhelpful to label some people as more like thermometers and others as more like thermostats or to describe either capacity as inferior or superior to the other.
- **People's capacity to use this internal thermometer and thermostat grows over time as adults and children evolve in their parent-child relationship.** When we struggle to exercise either or both capabilities, we need support—the child needs the adult's support, and the adult needs the support of other trusted adults—so that we can develop our coordinated capacity to use both our thermometer and thermostat. It is not because of the stereotyped notions of a “broken” parent or “broken” child. When these two capacities grow in a synchronous and coordinated way, everyday interactions between parent and child support the social-emotional wellbeing of both.

Expanding the Co-Regulation Framework to Address Healthy Development for Fathers and Children

In addition to understanding the relationship between fathers and children, how might this explanatory metaphor of thermometers and thermostats help us describe a program environment that supports both fathers and children?

The original [co-regulation framework](#) describes three important domains of actionable strategies to apply differentially across age groups: forming warm, responsive relationships; teaching self-regulation skills; and building a supportive environment (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017). Key concepts within the model include adaptability and flexibility according to context and age groups; thus, intentional application of the co-regulation framework to specific age groups and contexts involves modification of the original model (McKenzie et al., 2022; Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017). In **Figure 2** (McKenzie et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2023), the co-regulation framework was modified for application to youth and young adults with foster care experience.

The intent of the framework is to describe how co-regulation can support the development of self-regulation from birth to young adulthood, and specifically, how co-regulation manifests throughout the span of life and in different contexts. However, the elements of relationships, skill-building interactions, and supportive environments embedded in this framework can be extended beyond self-regulation development to include many dimensions of healthy development across the lifespan of adults and children, such as values and identities, learning and skill building, motivations and self-worth, social connections, and relational health. Each of the essential elements in the co-regulation framework—relationships, developmental interactions, and environments—can be woven into the important work of supporting and engaging fathers as they support and engage with their children, families, and communities.

Figure 2: Domains of Co-Regulation Applied to Youth With Foster Care Experience

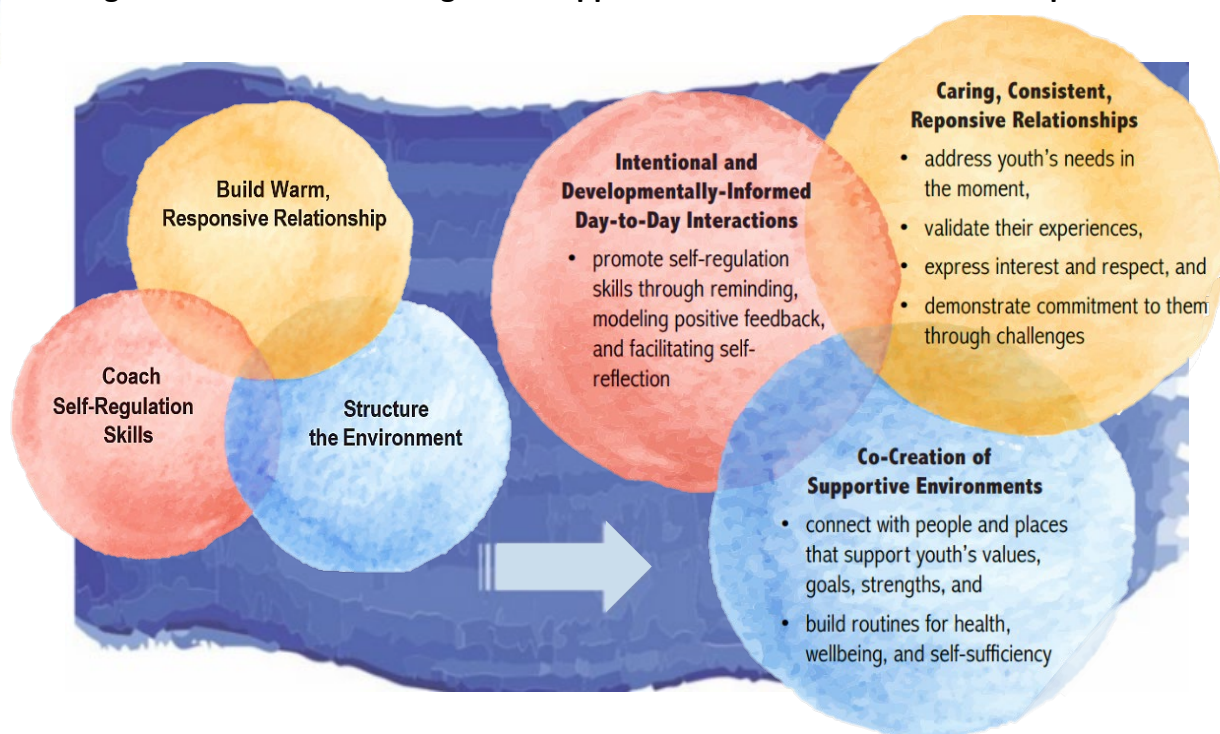


Image source: McKenzie et al., 2022

Imagine a father who arrives at a program event feeling uncertain of his role and whether he will be welcomed or respected. He might be particularly attuned to the “temperature” of the environment through subtle and not-so-subtle cues of who else is present, what is said or not said to him, and what activities are designed with or without his circumstances in mind.

The teacher or program director who invites and greets the father conveys a sense of welcome. The presence of other parents—especially other fathers—extends a sense of belonging. Ongoing encouragement, advice, and resources offered by both staff and other parents and peer leaders lend support to the father’s confidence as a parent and as a well-regarded leader in the community. On a larger scale, a program’s structure and activities can help sustain and deepen engagement when it supports and acknowledges a father’s interests, needs, strengths, and practical constraints. Governance processes that honor fathers’ voices, experiences, and ideas create conditions that affirm fathers’ roles and expand their leadership capacity.

All these practices, in small and big ways, embody the three essential elements in the co-regulation framework. They help set the metaphorical “temperature” with the larger program environment so that fathers feel recognized and supported as they continue strengthening relationships with their children.

An intentionally designed program to engage fathers can set the tone and temperature of a physical and social environment, like the thermostat, that welcomes fathers, affirms their roles, and creates opportunities

WHAT THEMES EMERGED FROM THE EXPERTS' DISCUSSIONS?

Themes related to connection, co-regulation, and engagement emerged from discussions about the different roles and relationships fathers have.

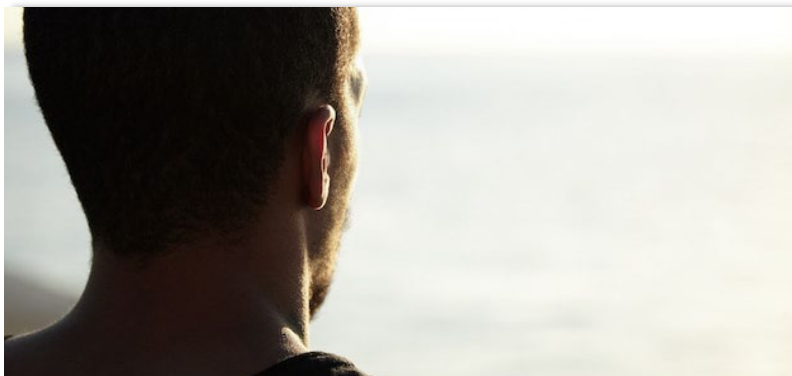
To learn about how co-regulation and connection could support the multiple roles fathers have, we identified six relational contexts that many fathers experience and that are relevant to human services programming. These are: fathers and themselves, fathers and their children, fathers and co-parents, fathers and program staff, fathers and peers, and fathers and their communities (as depicted in **Figure 3**). Meeting participants explored how emphasizing connection and the essential elements of the co-regulation framework (relationships, developmental interactions, and environments) in various program settings may promote father and family wellbeing. Below, we describe key themes that emerged from the discussion in each of these relational contexts. Importantly, many of these ideas are relevant across different program settings.

Figure 3: Six Relational Contexts for Father Engagement



Relational Context 1: Father-Self

Fathers' Self-Connection Provides a Critical Foundation for Connection With Others



The way we identify with ourselves is directly related to our ability to connect with others. Moreover, the way we view ourselves is shaped by our interactions with others, and whether those relationships promote a sense of belonging and validation for who we are. As a result, this relational context cuts across all the other categories.

How a father views his role and identity as a father and as a person can provide a source of meaning and motivation to engage in services and with his child(ren). A father's

self-perception can also serve as a source of shared experience when connecting with peers and with broader communities. It is important to recognize that a father's historical experiences—including possible trauma and disconnection, strengths, and resiliencies—provide the context for what a father brings to his current relationships. When a father understands this, it can provide an opportunity for healing that lessens the likelihood risks will be passed on to the next generations, and instead promotes wellbeing. Meeting members discussed the role of a father's connection with himself in the context of opportunities for promoting positive self-regard and affirming his identity.

- **Helping a father identify his own challenges, strengths, and resiliencies can help him realize the positive, unique contributions that he can bring to his role and relationships as a father.** As a participant shared, the phrase “You can’t help the father without healing the man” serves as a reminder that a father is a whole person. Creating space for reflection and connection can allow fathers to explore how their own journey as individuals, including their own childhood and any past trauma or adverse experiences, influences their self-identity, their ideas around fatherhood, and their relationships with others.
- **Building and sustaining a positive self-concept can help counter negative stereotypes or external messages about a father's value or role.** Self-reflection and connection can help fathers discern external messages about others' expectations of them, their role, or their value as a father that may cause resentment or feelings of burden and stress. In reconnecting with a positive sense of self-identity and goals as a father, they can reimagine their fatherhood in a way that allows them to be their authentic selves, counteracting messages that portray a monolithic role shaped by negative stereotypes.
- **Because of shared experiences, supportive peer relationships provide a particularly important opportunity for self-exploration, a mirror to realize self-worth, and a source of motivation for change.** Peer support groups can create space for fathers to explore personal challenges that get in the way of meeting goals as a father, such as grief and loss, substance misuse, domestic violence, difficulties with self-regulation, or negative feelings about their identity as a father.

Relational Context 2: Father-Child

Parent-Child Relationships Can Help the Father and Child Flourish



The numerous benefits of positive father-child relationships are well known (Diniz et al., 2021). These relationships can be a source of love, connection, and meaning for both father and child, as well as support child development. The essential elements in the co-regulation framework—relationships, skill-building interactions, and supportive environments—also provide a focusing lens for how human services programs might support the father-child relationship:

- **The co-regulation framework could help to highlight benefits of the parent-child relationship to the fathers themselves,** since, historically, research and programs have focused on the benefits to the child.
- **An understanding of child development may equip fathers with tools to strengthen relationships with their children.** Examples and activities that focus on fathers' contributions to child development can provide helpful nuggets of information in parent-focused meetings, as well as offer tools and resources to enrich the quality of parent-child interactions. Peers may be able to support this learning and create a sense of belonging, for example, by sharing experiences as a parent and offering validation and support.
- **A focus on the quality of interactions and more nuanced measures of father-child involvement are needed to help reframe what constitutes meaningful engagement.** For example, definitions of quality interactions that go beyond simply measuring time would allow programs to better support parent-child relationships for noncustodial parents, who may have fewer opportunities to spend time with their children, but nevertheless make their time together high quality. This could also more accurately capture relationship quality for fathers living in the home, who may have more time with their child but who may benefit from learning about high-quality, day-to-day interactions that support their child's development and strengthen their relational bond.
- **It is important to address the systemic barriers and pervasive narratives about fatherhood that can hinder fathers' efforts to engage in programming and maintain relationships with their children.** This includes the large number of noncustodial fathers who may need to overcome additional obstacles in their efforts to maintain quality relationships with their children, in addition to the diversity of other life contexts and experiences of fathers. Gendered beliefs about parenting that fathers hear from society more broadly and that may be held by program staff must be countered with strengths-based structures, interactions, and relationships that are supportive of father-child engagement.

Relational Context 3: Father-Co-parent(s)

Strengthening Co-Parenting Relationships Can Foster Positive Connection



Strengthening the relationship between co-parents—regardless of whether they are romantically linked—can support a father’s wellbeing, provide a source of positive connection, and create an opportunity for co-regulation as co-parents navigate parenting decisions together. This, in turn, can support the father-child relationship and positive child development. Meeting participants shared the following ideas about the father-co-parent(s) relationship:

- **Structuring the program and service environment to be welcoming to both parents is an important aspect of co-regulation and relationship-building.** A focus on relationships, developmental interactions, and supportive environments can provide the flexibility to create father-friendly spaces where fathers feel welcome and seen.
- **There is enormous variability in co-parenting relationships, even among coupled and noncoupled co-parents, and each requires the capacity for co-regulation.** There can be added complications if there are other parental figures and caregivers in the relationship, including new romantic partners, grandparents, and extended family. Even within amicable relationships, there may be disagreements about parenting approaches. These challenges lend themselves to a co-regulatory approach to navigating the relationship, which is ultimately supportive of the child’s positive development.
- **If programs cannot serve co-parents at the same time, they can be developed to work with the co-parent and father in turn, each through a relational and co-regulatory lens.** For example, some programs, including those aimed primarily at mothers, have worked to build empathy in co-parents, such as helping mothers understand the important role of the father for the child’s development beyond financial contributions.

Relational Context 4: Father-Program Staff

Interactions Between Program Staff and Fathers Offer Opportunities for Intentional Co-Regulation, Positive Connection, and Affirmation



Individual program staff members who interact directly with fathers have a substantial opportunity to shape a father's experience in program services. In prior OPRE studies, we have learned how fathers value the connections and relationships they develop with staff and other fathers in the program (Holcomb et al., 2019). Studies also describe how programs can create warm and welcoming environments to enhance fathers' engagement and

Individual program staff members who interact directly with fathers have a substantial opportunity to shape a father's experience in program services.

participation in programming (Marano et al., 2022). The insights below from meeting participants bolster and add nuance to what we have learned from those studies:

- **Small interactions between fathers and program staff can have big effects on engagement and retention.** The impacts of these small interactions can be positive or negative and can leave a lasting impression. Given the salience of small interactions, it is important to structure human services programs in ways that enable and foster staff interaction with fathers that will have a positive impact. For example, intentionally building extra time into a workshop without adding more content or activities could provide opportunities for staff to focus on the smaller details of interactions.
- **There is a tension between fidelity to a program model and the approaches necessary for co-regulation and connection,** such as being more conversational and flexible to meet fathers' needs or intentionally enacting co-regulation in ways that match the circumstance and the person. Unfortunately, there are often pressures on staff that result in their feeling rushed and/or as though there isn't time to develop and expand the small interactions and gestures that are not listed in an intervention protocol.
- **Staff could use co-regulation approaches for structuring the program service environment to engage fathers, affirm their identities, foster a sense of belonging, and provide opportunities for fathers' input and leadership.** This could include involving

fathers in setting group norms for participation, displaying positive messages about fathers, and identifying small group activities that include collaboration and teamwork between fathers.

- **Materials that prioritize fathers as parents in intentional ways need to be developed and distributed to support staff training, practice, and policy.** These materials could demonstrate how to express this intentionality around fathers within the mission and goals of organizations. They could also provide guidance on how to address staff biases and concerns related to fathers, how to clarify specific strategies for inclusion of fathers that are not dependent on the mother, and how to build on knowledge about the wide range of backgrounds of fathers they serve.
- **Staff should be trained in ways to cultivate, mentor, and build the talent pipeline of men within the workforce.** Beyond strategies for maintaining contact with father participants who express interest in pursuing such options, staff could be trained on how to link the goals and strengths of participants (e.g., caring for children, listening skills, and attention to detail) to the types of work being done in the human services field (e.g., childcare, social work, and employment supports).

Relational Context 5: Father-Peers

Through Shared Experiences, Positive Relationships with Peers Can Support Fathers' Engagement in Programming



Interest has grown in recent years over the role of peer connections in a father's experience and engagement in services (Abbott et al., 2019). Cohort-based programs offer an opportunity for relationships to develop over time; some programs may also offer separate opportunities for connection among program participants and graduates. Some fatherhood programs also use peer outreach or peer mentor approaches that provide opportunities for program alumni to connect with prospective or participating fathers and support them throughout the program. Meeting participants discussed how peer relationships in programs can be a source of connection and co-regulation for fathers, affirming their identities and creating a shared sense of belonging.

- **Peer interactions within a services context can empower fathers by reinforcing feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy.** The opportunity to relate to others with similar

experiences can help fathers not only be supported and feel less alone in their circumstances, but also provide them the opportunity to offer support to others, instilling a stronger sense of validation and self-worth. Messages from peers who have been through similar life challenges and have been able to meet their goals can offer hope and provide a sense of purpose and renewed focus; these can be powerful motivators for change. Such reciprocal relationships may also bridge the gap between human services systems to help fathers learn to trust others and accept support.

- **Peer supports can promote engagement in programming, but cohort models may have flexibility trade-offs since they require participation at specific times.** Incentives or economic compensation for participation in peer groups can help with competing time and role demands and reinforce fathers' inherent value as contributing participants. While anecdotal evidence on peer support specialist roles and peer connection through cohort models is promising, critical questions remain, and rigorous evaluation is needed to identify and measure the outcomes we intend to affect.
- **Thoughtful and intentional design of peer support programs is critical to promote authentic engagement.** For example, simply redesigning a peer support component of a motherhood program for fathers undermines authenticity and connection. As best practices on peer supports are identified, it is important to collect data to understand whether participants perceive the peer support as supportive. If programs are not perceived by participants as being supportive and authentic, they can have unintended effects and risk increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Relational Context 6: Father-Community

Fathers' Connections to Communities Must Be Acknowledged and Strengthened



Fathers are valuable assets to their communities not solely through their economic contributions, but through their contributions to community life, neighborhood wellbeing, and service to others. When human services focus on men in their role as a father, it is often primarily about their employment and economic contribution to the family; their role in the community is often not considered. Human services programs should also think of fathers as mentors and leaders, beyond the narrow conceptions of economic providers. During the discussion, participants shared how recognizing a father's diverse connections with and contributions to the community allows human services programs to better serve him as a

whole person, thus affirming his identity, creating a sense of belonging, and cultivating his leadership:


- **There is tremendous potential in supporting the actualization of the many types of important relationships and roles fathers can have in the community.** Supporting fathers in their community relationships should involve actively preparing fathers for community engagement, creating opportunities for involvement, and paving meaningful and enduring pathways for positive community roles and responsibilities; this can be done in part by providing fathers with: (1) social support from peers and friends; (2) opportunities for fathers to become mentors and leaders themselves; and (3) places and spaces where fathers can engage their children.
- **Within their communities, fathers need proximal, visible, and accessible resources and social support to navigate complex systems.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual approaches for implementing human services programs were piloted, demonstrating how technology can continue to facilitate father participation. Employment approaches with an emphasis on learning environments or those based on technology may also be helpful to consider when exploring ways to connect fathers to employment resources and opportunities in the community. Examples from the justice field, such as the [Thinking for a Change](#) program, may provide good models.
- **Unhealed root causes and enduring punishments within communities can keep fathers from realizing important roles and responsibilities.** These issues in communities must be acknowledged, addressed, and healed.
- **Human services approaches should be informed by listening to and learning from the wisdom and knowledge of the community and of parents.** Community members and parents often know approaches that are concrete and actionable.

Across the Ecosystem

Attention to Relationships and Co-Regulation Opportunities Across Contexts Can Support Holistic and Comprehensive Supports for Fathers

The meeting discussions highlighted several opportunities to support fathers across these relational contexts and in different program settings. Below are important considerations as programs explore how to best support fathers holistically and comprehensively:

- **Fathers need support and affirmative feedback about their roles as fathers.**
Three questions that could guide programmatic work are: (1) Where do fathers receive specific affirmative feedback about their contributions as parents? (2) In the community that surrounds fathers, who are the trusted messengers that convey affirmative feedback? (3) How do we programmatically and intentionally put in place touchpoints between fathers and these messengers?
- **There are opportunities for public messaging to change the culture of fatherhood and how fathers are viewed,** including but not limited to social media, commercials, and public service announcements.

- 
- **Having a supportive person throughout the lifespan can help everyone—including fathers—build resilience, find connection, and continue to push forward in difficult times.**
 - **All relationships take intentional effort to create and sustain and require a variety of skills**, including but not limited to patience, empathy, healthy conflict resolution, compromise, healthy communication, and respect. Working on relationships can take time and is sometimes viewed as intangible and therefore less important or practical for programs to specifically address; however, making space for this work and addressing it specifically is important.

A RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED VISION FOR ENGAGING FATHERS

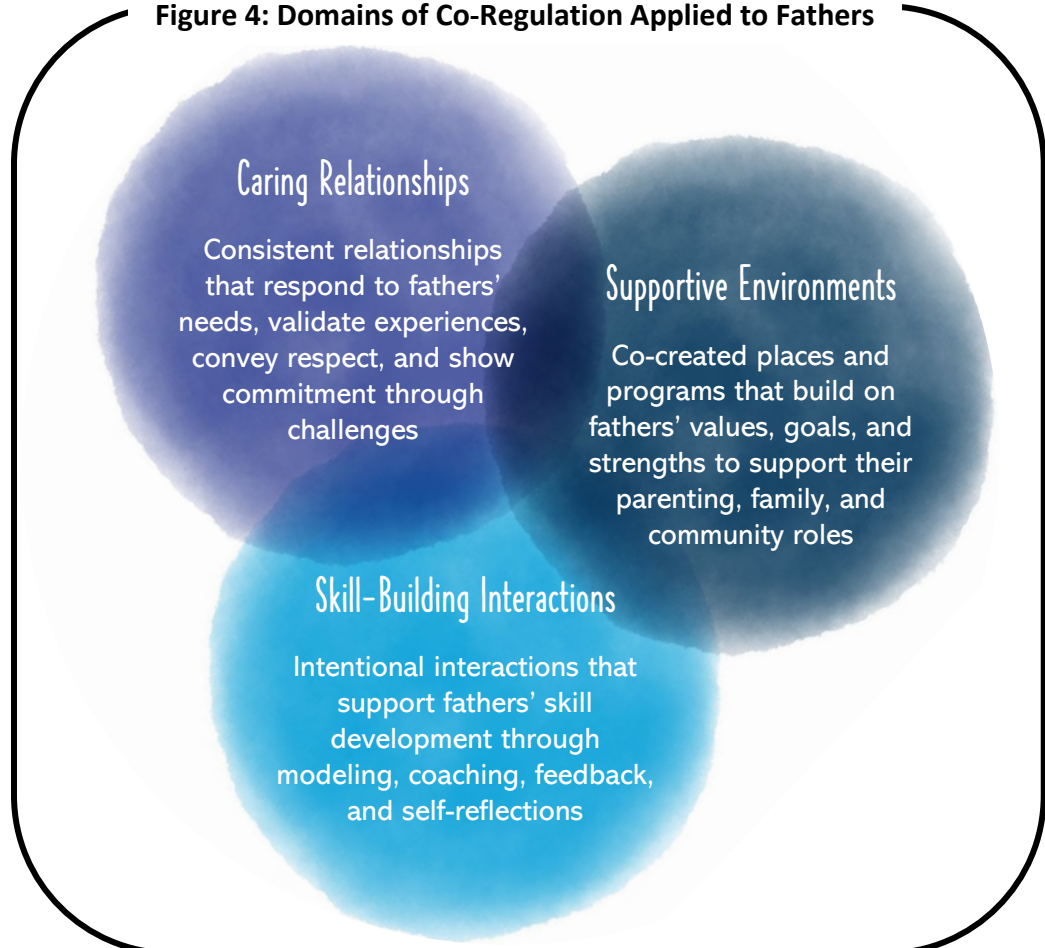
Reflecting on the themes that emerged from the discussion on father engagement and co-regulation, the meeting participants identified a host of potential barriers and promising opportunities to integrate the underlying strategies of the co-regulation framework, the practices of relationship-building, and father engagement work across human services programs. In this section, we map the participants' input into a relationship-focused roadmap for engaging fathers across the human services system.

Extending the Co-Regulation Framework to Engage Fathers

The [co-regulation framework](#), adapted from Murray et al.'s (2019) model, has three overlapping domains of actionable strategies: building caring relationships, creating supportive environments, and focusing on skill-building interactions (**Figure 4**).

When we extend this child- and youth-focused framework to father engagement, we recognize that ***building a network of caring relationships*** remains the foundation of adult development, just as it is for supporting children and youth. Some of these relationships may already exist, but they are best nurtured and strengthened through intentional efforts to ***structure the relational contexts***.

Figure 4: Domains of Co-Regulation Applied to Fathers



By explicitly naming and understanding the six relational contexts, as described in the meeting themes above, we can be deliberate about improving the interactions across numerous touchpoints between fathers and the wide array of human services programs:

1. The relationship of the fathers with themselves
2. The relationship between fathers and children
3. The relationship between fathers and co-parents
4. The relationship between fathers and program staff
5. The relationship between fathers and peers
6. The relationship between fathers and community

The co-regulation framework was initially developed to focus on the development of children's and youth's self-regulation skills. In applying the strategies of co-regulation to

In applying the strategies of co-regulation to fatherhood engagement, we can expand the goals of fatherhood engagement to a more holistic understanding of fathers' development.

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To organize the wide array of ideas from our meeting with experts, we adopt the **A-B-C framework** (affirm identity, build community, and cultivate leadership) from the field of school-based racial identity

development (Tatum, 1992, 2000, & 2017).⁴ We recognize that fathers often feel marginalized across the human services system. Using this framework, we identify three interconnected father engagement goals:

- **Affirm Fathers' Identities**: Help fathers see and experience themselves as caregivers and individuals and be recognized and respected by those around them in their roles as parents and community members.
- **Build a Sense of Belonging**: Help fathers feel genuinely connected with peers, co-parents, and program staff within and beyond the context of human services programs.
- **Cultivate Program and Community Leadership**: Help fathers develop as key contributors to human services programs and as leaders on actions and issues important to the larger community.

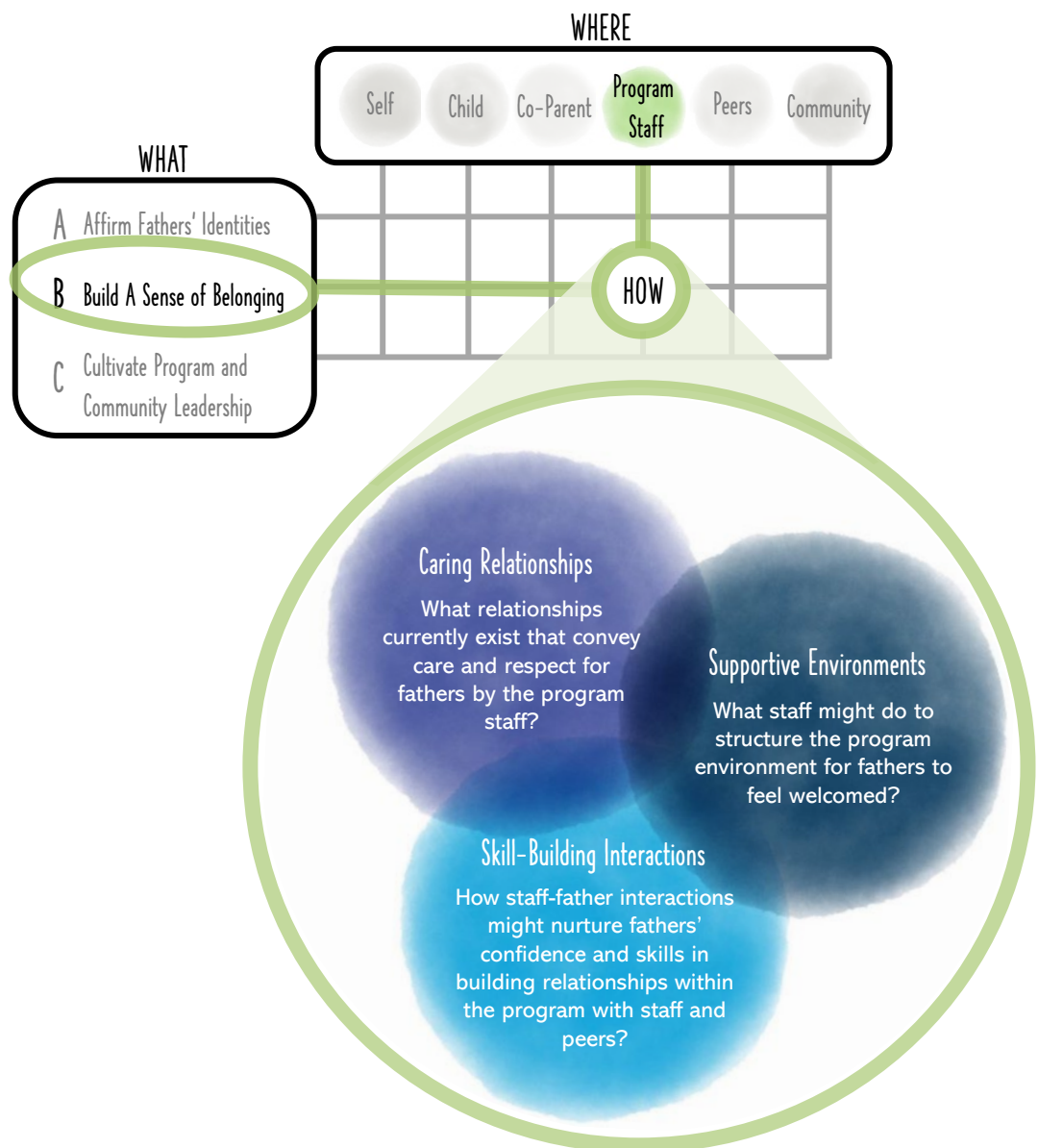
Unlike the co-regulation framework that we shared with experts during the meeting, we identified the A-B-C goals after the meeting, during our process of analyzing and organizing the various themes and ideas that came up throughout the meeting.

⁴ The A-B-C framework (affirm identity, build community, and cultivate leadership) was originally proposed by psychologist Beverly Tatum to understand and promote the development of marginalized Black students in White-majority school settings.

Combining these elements, we construct a vision for engaging fathers across the human services system. The A-B-C goals are the “what” of father engagement. The three co-regulation actionable strategies can serve as the “how” of father engagement. The six relational contexts are “where”—or, more precisely, “between whom”—the strategies are enacted. Together, the goals, strategies, and relational contexts describe programmatic opportunities to apply a set of co-regulation strategies to analyze and strengthen relationships toward the father engagement goals. The organizing matrix in **Figure 5** illustrates how these come together in a specific example:

At the intersection of Goal B (Build a Sense of Belonging) and the relational context of father-program staff relationship, we could examine what relationships currently exist that convey care and respect for fathers by the program staff, what staff might do to structure the program environment for fathers to feel welcomed, and how staff-father interactions might nurture fathers’ confidence and skills in building relationships within the program with staff and peers.

Figure 5: An Organizing Matrix for Engaging Fathers Across Relationship Contexts



The three A-B-C goals, six relational contexts, and three actionable strategies (adapted from the co-regulation framework) are guideposts that can together shape father engagement. The goals reinforce each other, the relationships depend on each other, and the strategies strengthen each other. They are not separate boxes to be “checked off,” but a matrix with many possible intersections. While specific approaches to engaging fathers will need to be adapted to the capacity and constraints of each program and community, the overall vision serves as an organizer to help understand promising existing practices and develop and formalize local practices.

Organizing Barriers and Opportunities for Father Engagement Through the Relationship-Focused Vision

In this section, we organize the participants’ discussions through the proposed relationship-focused vision for father engagement. For each of the three A-B-C developmental goals of father engagement, we identify the relationships involved and describe the barriers and opportunities that exist in program practices.

Father Engagement Goal A: Affirm Fathers’ Identities

To advance this goal, the focal relational context is between fathers and themselves—how they see and experience themselves as fathers, individuals, and members of a community. The remaining five relationships serve to support this focal relationship and help to affirm fathers’ identities. How fathers see themselves affects (and is affected by) how

Our programs, practices, and communications serve as mirrors through which our images of fathers are reflected back to them.

fathers engage with children, co-parents, other fathers, program staff, and the community at large.

Our programs, practices, and communications serve as mirrors through which our images of fathers are reflected

back to them. Fathers need to be able to find themselves in the faces of those who are engaged with our programs. They need to see their contributions and roles reflected in the programming, activities, and decisions. This spans a wide range of fatherhood, including married, partnered, or single fathers; resident or nonresident fathers; and working or nonworking fathers. Both at the program level and at the individual level of fathers, we need to counter the biases and stereotypes about fathers from societal, cultural, and historical contexts.

Programmatic, cultural, and structural contexts influence efforts to support a father’s connections with children and co-parents, and thereby his identity in the fathering role. Despite fathers’ increasing involvement in their children’s lives, gendered stereotypes and mother-centered services can reduce fathers’ roles to primarily being providers of financial and material support. The mission, vision, and

Both at the program level and at the individual level of fathers, we need to counter the biases and stereotypes about fathers from societal, cultural, and historical contexts.

goals of human services programs vary greatly. Many programs do not explicitly include fathers or only include fathers in narrowly defined roles.

To better support fathers, we need to reframe these traditions within human services and rebuild a culture with intentional efforts to affirm fathers' identities and value fathers' engagement. Fathers want to know what to expect and how their role in their child's life matters. In a powerful illustration, Georgetown University's Baby Elmo project focuses on supporting incarcerated fathers by creating opportunities for father-infant interactions during brief visitation periods (Richeda et al., 2015). The intervention not only improved the fathers' interactions with their infants but also how the fathers perceived their impact and influence on their children's development. However, a test of an adaptation of this program for fatherhood programs in community settings, called Just Beginning, did not demonstrate improved outcomes for fathers' relationships with their children (Manno et al., 2021). While approaches like this are designed for very specific settings and father populations and would need much trial and error to adapt to other contexts, they demonstrate the underlying applicable principle that fathers' identities are rooted in the quality of their interactions with their children—and improving the quality and opportunity for such interactions helps affirm identities, and vice versa.

In discussing the pathways that affirm fathers' identities, our meeting participants contributed their understanding of barriers and opportunities within the human services system. **Table 1** provides a synthesis of their perspectives.

Table 1: Pathways to Affirming Fathers' Identities

Barriers to Affirming Fathers' Identities	Opportunities for Affirming Fathers' Identities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Human services programs most often focus only on maternal-child needs, whether explicitly or implicitly.• Child support enforcement has historically had an adversarial relationship with fathers.• The child welfare system can be very difficult and lonely for fathers to navigate.• Behavioral health services are often stigmatized or unavailable for fathers.• Past criminal offenses restrict fathers' use of employment services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Produce and share resources that explicitly name and directly support fathers' engagement in the lives of their children starting as early as the prenatal period.• Help fathers practice co-regulation approaches with their children in ways that meet developmental goals that the fathers identify for their children (such as being healthy, doing well in school, and having friends).• Develop examples and activities that help fathers learn co-regulation strategies and begin to implement what they are learning with their children.• Model parallel relational strategies to promote fathers' relationships with peers.• Emphasize to fathers, program staff, and administrative leadership the benefits of being engaged fathers and connected community members to the fathers' own mental, physical, and emotional health.

Father Engagement Goal B: Build a Sense of Belonging

To advance this goal, the focal relational contexts are between fathers and other adults within the program setting—whether fathers can find a genuine sense of connection with those around them who share their experiences and can support and affirm who they are. This sense of belonging can be reinforced directly by fathers’ relationships with peers, co-parents and other parents, and program staff.

Fathers’ own sense of confidence and competence as a parent is strengthened by the social and structural supports in community and program contexts. A program’s explicit recruitment of fathers and intentional relationship-building among fathers help initiate peer-to-peer connections and offer fathers opportunities to share their diverse needs and experiences. A continuous and strong sense of belonging to the communities of parents and staff within programs lends further support as fathers embrace the many facets of their roles in family, program, and neighborhood.

Fathers are not a monolithic group. There is significant variability across fathers’ experiences of parenting, adult relationships, and circumstances. Program staff can best understand the many ways of being a father through listening and sharing within trusted relationships. When program practices operate on one-size-fits-all assumptions, we miss opportunities to include and understand each father’s unique experience, incur risks of compounding fathers’ previous adverse experiences, and ultimately fall short of providing each father with a sense of belonging and engagement.

Every programmatic interaction involving fathers (e.g., drop-off/pick-up, discussions about children’s needs or progress, parenting workshops, community-building events, or invitations to children’s activities) carries messages that either affirm or discourage their engagement. Being intentional about these interactions involves both one-to-one interactions between and among fathers and staff, as well as structuring the program environment (its activities, communications, and professional practices) to make such interactions more likely.

Table 2 provides a synthesis of what our meeting participants identified as barriers and opportunities to building a sense of belonging among fathers within the human services system.

Table 2: Pathways to Building a Sense of Belonging

Barriers to Building a Sense of Belonging	Opportunities for Building a Sense of Belonging
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When a program model or curriculum does not explicitly include fathers, or narrowly defines fathers’ roles (e.g., solely a financial provider), there can be tensions between adhering to implementation fidelity and creating space for responsive, conversational interactions with and among fathers.• Even when programs acknowledge the important value of building relationships with and among fathers, it is often difficult to target relational improvements. When funding and time constraints hamper a program’s capacity (which is common), investment in relationships takes a	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support program staff to find meaning in co-regulation strategies that resonate with their own lived experiences. In doing so, they may be better able to see their day-to-day professional work as relational practices that build connections and shape environments.• Support program staff and parent and peer leaders to model practices that help each father feel valued and like he belongs so that fathers feel more comfortable contributing authentically to the program environment.• Design group activities and sessions specifically

Barriers to Building a Sense of Belonging	Opportunities for Building a Sense of Belonging
<p>back seat in priority and attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without an explicit and intentional focus, relationships become difficult to specify, and intentions to build relationships are not matched with concrete actions. 	<p>for peer sharing and learning among fathers to create an environment conducive to community-building, which further enhances one-on-one connections.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize that these strategies—building connections and shaping environments—not only apply to direct service and program management but can be flexibly extended to other administrative levels across the human services system.

Father Engagement Goal C: Cultivate Program and Community Leadership

To advance this goal, the focal relational contexts are between fathers and program staff as well as fathers and their communities—whether fathers have the support and opportunities to contribute and lead—which in turn can impact many families and the larger community.

The transformation of fathers' roles from participants to leaders requires intentional cultivation from program staff, parent leaders, and peer mentors. Extending beyond their roles within the family, fathers can become community-builders, advocates for children and families, and engaged contributors and decision-makers for programs. Fathers need opportunities to contribute in formal capacities and learning opportunities to develop their skills. It is important that the demands of such roles be matched with fair compensation for fathers, rather than assuming that fathers can contribute indefinite amounts of volunteer hours without economic support. Financial incentives, as one aspect of respectful recognition of fathers' leadership contributions, along with logistical support and flexibility, help pave sustainable pathways for engagement and leadership development.

Due to time constraints, our meeting participants did not focus extensively on describing the existing practices that support leadership development but affirmed that many local efforts are underway to support fathers to be visible and impactful at the program and community levels. **Table 3** below represents the partial ideas that were shared.

Table 3: Pathways to Cultivating Program and Community Leadership

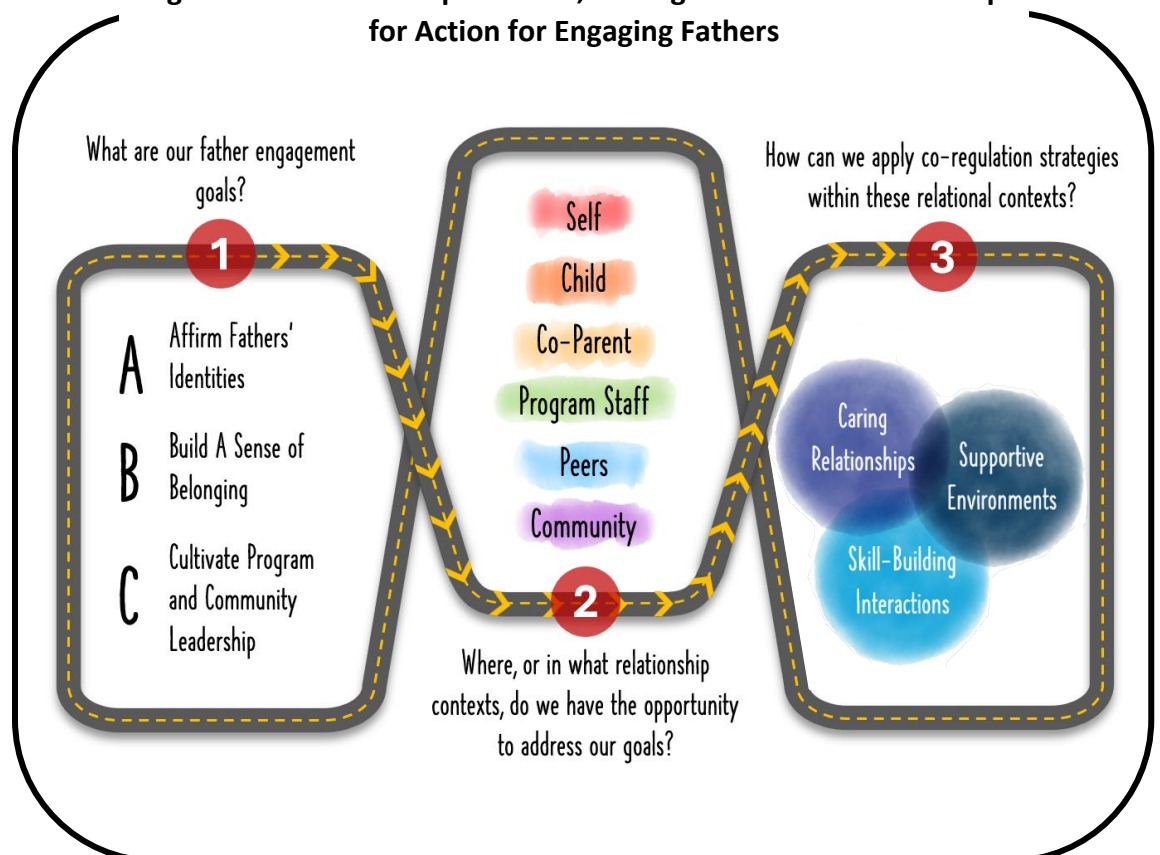
Barriers to Cultivating Leadership	Opportunities for Cultivating Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of formal roles and responsibilities for fathers' engagement in program decision making. Expectations that fathers will volunteer their time without a pathway toward compensated and formalized leadership roles. Lack of programmatic support for leadership and advocacy skill development for fathers to go beyond parenting skill development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is tremendous potential in supporting the actualization of the many types of important relationships and roles fathers can have in the community. Human services programs can think beyond narrow conceptions of fathers as economic providers; programs can also recognize fathers as mentors and leaders. Human services approaches should be informed by listening to and learning from the wisdom and knowledge of the community and of parents, including fathers. Community members and parents often know approaches that are concrete and actionable.

Barriers to Cultivating Leadership	Opportunities for Cultivating Leadership
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff should be trained in ways to invite, mentor, and build the talent pipeline of fathers within the workforce. Beyond strategies for maintaining contact with fathers who express interest in pursuing such options, staff could be trained on how to link the goals and strengths of fathers (e.g., speaking about child development, listening skills, and community organizing) to the types of work done in the human services field (e.g., childcare, social work, and employment supports).

HOW HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMS CAN DEVELOP A ROADMAP FOR ACTION TO SUPPORT FATHER ENGAGEMENT

How might a human services program adapt the strategies underlying the co-regulation framework across the six relational contexts to engage and support fathers? We show here how a simple roadmap for action (**Figure 6**) may be developed to assess a program's current strengths and needs related to father engagement and how program leadership can then use this assessment to plan moving forward. There are multiple entry points for programs to integrate the ideas in this report, and the approach below is just one example scenario.

Figure 6. A Relationship-Focused, Co-Regulation-Based Roadmap for Action for Engaging Fathers



Many programs already have formal and informal structures to support and engage fathers. Through a program self-assessment, program leaders can identify and describe the unique needs of the community and the existing program strengths.

First, in relation to the three overlapping goals of engagement—affirm identity, build belonging, and cultivate leadership—what do program leaders identify as the current strengths of the program, and what opportunities exist for the program to grow?

For example, a program may recognize that its existing social activities have intentionally included fathers and created spaces for fathers to connect with each other—so it is already making progress in building a sense of belonging among fathers. The program may then identify opportunities where some of the most active fathers could be explicitly invited to take on paid or volunteer roles on program committees to help lead efforts to engage fathers as well as to take on broader program leadership.

Second, programs can assess which existing relationships could be leveraged to grow additional relationships.

In the example above, the program may be able to build on its father-father relationships and father-staff relationships to invite and recruit active fathers to consider leadership roles, thereby elevating the fathers' relationships within the larger community. In addition, the program may intentionally facilitate father-father groups based on existing relationships, so that fathers could share their experiences and lend support to each other to strengthen father-co-parent and father-child relationships.

Third, as programs develop new action plans, intentional strategies modeled after the co-regulation framework—build relationships, strengthen skill-building interactions, and structure the environment—can be integrated into the design of new activities.

Building on the relational strategy, the program may identify small but meaningful touchpoints where trusted others (staff, peers) can affirm fathers' active roles and contributions in their children's lives. Programs can be intentional about conveying messages that debunk stereotypical assumptions about fathers. Building on the developmental interactions strategy, the program can design targeted training and mentoring approaches to help fathers develop specific skills and governance structures where fathers can assume substantive leadership roles within program-family partnerships. Strategies to structure the environment include social, educational, and community building activities, such as meals celebrating fathers, father-child outings, and BBQs for fathers that bridge existing and new relationships. Each of these examples includes multifaceted opportunities for engagement with fathers as both participants and leaders/ organizers. In addition, programs can allocate budget to fairly compensate fathers beyond volunteering in organizing, advocacy, and community leadership.

As these actions take place, the program can continuously assess its evolving strengths and needs in relation to the larger goals of affirming identity, building belonging, and cultivating leadership. Progress toward each goal—and its associated relationships and strategies—reinforces the other goals. The template of this roadmap can provide a unifying and coherent vision for how activities, roles, and relationships interconnect, while leaving ample space for each program to invent and implement ideas uniquely adapted to the needs and strengths of its fathers, families, and communities.

Intentional Communication With and About Fathers

One important way in which the insights from this report can be applied is understanding and addressing how human services programs communicate about fathers and with fathers. Just as every interaction touchpoint can be important in affirming fathers' identities, every message—whether intended or unintended—can either support or undermine the relationship-focused

vision for engaging fathers outlined in this report. These messages come across many touchpoints, including discussions about children's development, parenting, and parent engagement with programs.

There is limited research on how to best communicate about and with fathers. It is an important area of future research. In the meantime, we can be informed by communication research on how to (and how not to) talk about parents in general and the specific biases and stereotypes toward fathers.

These strategies align closely with the importance of connection and co-regulation in father engagement.

Table 4 presents a synthesis of various communication research on parent engagement and related issues (FrameWorks Institute, 2020; O'Neil et al., 2019), starting with themes that closely align with the topics discussed at the meeting with experts. These themes are worth emphasizing when communicating with and about families. **Table 4** also includes recommendations from communication research for what to do and what not to do.

Table 4. Communication Best Practices for Parent Engagement

Themes	Communication "Dos"	Communication "Don'ts"
Importance of connection between fathers and children	Focus on articulating what children need to thrive (relationships and connections).	Avoid blaming and evaluating parents, even implicitly through the discussion of "good" or "effective" parenting, or what parents "should" or "shouldn't" do.
	Establish the importance of everyday interactions with parents in children's development.	Avoid assumptions that children develop "naturally."
Importance of the developmental nature of fatherhood through relational supports	Celebrate and affirm the full experiences of parenthood—its joys and challenges. Emphasize that parenting grows with practice.	Avoid normalizing "struggle" as the primary or only mode of parenting experience.
	Emphasize that all parents need support, and all parents receive support.	Avoid fatalistic narratives such as "we parent the way we were parented," or "parenting isn't what it used to be."
Importance of structuring the environment to support fathers	Help convey that circumstances shape the options and choices	Avoid assumptions that "good parenting" comes naturally just to

Themes	Communication “Dos”	Communication “Don’ts”
	parents have.	some people.
	Focus on creating conditions for parent engagement, describing specific barriers as well as equitable practices of parent engagement.	Avoid describing parent engagement (or the lack of) only as a parent’s individual choice, without consideration of the supporting conditions and contexts.

MOVING FORWARD WITH RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR LEARNING AND EXPLORATION

Meeting participants identified several areas for future learning to inform how insights about human connection and co-regulation could be applied to support fathers in human services programs. We organize these priorities by the type of study that could be used to further our understanding and guide action.

Translational Inquiry

Some priorities involve translating what has been effective in other public domains to human services as well as applying what is known from other fields to understanding fathers in human services programs:

- What can be learned from justice empowerment models for fathers and applied to human services programs?
- What circumstances of fathers' lives should be considered as we work to understand various strategies and what works, for whom, and when? For example, acknowledging the unique, intersectional experiences of fathers who fit multiple categories is important (e.g., a father who is married, engaged in the lives of children at home, and unable to be engaged with children from previous relationships).
- Which aspects of the concept of social capital and the nature of interpersonal interactions and connections are particularly relevant to father engagement?
- What is known about changing attributions and healing from experiences that could be applied to staff perceptions of fathers?

Descriptive Studies

Other priorities require gaining a better understanding of implementation challenges within human services program settings:

- How do staff perceive fathers as participants in human services programs? How do these perceptions influence father engagement?
- How do staff experience and manage requirements for fidelity with expectations for relationship-focused interactions such as co-regulation, particularly as it relates to participants who are fathers?

Measurement Validation, Improvement, and Development

This priority involves identifying, modifying, and developing the types of measures that would be most helpful for understanding process and outcomes:

- What are more nuanced ways to measure co-regulation and connection than adherence to a protocol or amount of time?
- What strengths-based and multidimensional measures of fatherhood could be used to expand existing measures of fatherhood beyond historical provider ideologies of fathering?

Pilot Testing and Feasibility

This type of priority involves developing and testing specific strategies across populations, settings, and development:

- What training supports can help staff center fathers' voices and needs when developing (and during) programming?
- How might peer co-regulation strategies among participants be applied to improve father engagement, retention, and outcomes in human services programs that serve fathers?

Documenting and Disseminating Successes

In addition to the specific ideas offered by the meeting contributors, we also identified inquiries that can document the existing and ongoing successes and practical wisdom in integrating connection and co-regulation insights with fatherhood engagement work in human services.

- Developing case studies of where we are doing well when it comes to affirming fathers' identities, building a sense of belonging, and cultivating fathers' leadership in the human services sector.
- Documenting promising approaches, messages, and messengers that counter biases and stereotypes.
- Creating communities of practice where innovations and local experimentations can be shared among programs to advance various elements of the "roadmap for action," whether they are related to improving a particular relational context, better integrating a particular co-regulation strategy, or making progress toward the A-B-C (affirming identity, building belonging, and cultivating leadership) goals.

This 2021 meeting to explore the integration of fatherhood work and the science of co-regulation and human connection helped to identify actionable opportunities to strengthen father engagement across the human services sector. The rich and insightful input from our diverse group of expert participants led to the expansion of OPRE's co-regulation framework to include supporting adults—especially fathers—across six important relational contexts. Interactions and connections in each of these contexts can contribute to the larger goals of affirming fathers' identities, building fathers' sense of belonging in programs and communities, and cultivating fathers' leadership roles and skills. The synthesis of the expert participants' input and relevant fatherhood research yielded a relationship-focused vision for understanding and strengthening father engagement. As practitioners and programs develop a concrete roadmap for action to support on-the-ground work, we can continuously and collectively develop, study, and apply lessons learned from the field.

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Applying Insights From Human Connection and Co-Regulation:

Supporting Fathers in Human Services Programs

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