



REFRAMING NARRATIVES TO MORE ACCURATELY AND POSITIVELY REFLECT FATHERS' ROLES IN FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The evolving role of fathers, from that of primarily breadwinners to co-contributors to children's healthy development, has come increasingly into focus over the past several decades. We now know that engaged fatherhood is linked to improved outcomes along nearly every measure of child well-being, from cognitive development and educational outcomes to pro-social behavior. According to [the University of Texas' Child and Family Research Partnership](#), children who grow up with involved fathers are:

- 39 percent more likely to earn mostly A's in school
- Twice as likely to go to college and find stable employment after high school

Two-parent households in the US have been on the decline, while divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation have been on the rise for more than a half century. Only 69 percent of children lived in two-parent households in 2014, compared to 73 percent in 2000 and 87 percent in 1960. And even for those children born into two-parent households, increasing fluidity of families means that many will experience evolving living arrangements regardless of their starting point.

These [trends](#) have existed for decades within BIPOC communities where policies have undermined family formation and stability. Eleven percent of Hispanic children lived with parents in cohabiting living arrangements in 2014, while 29 percent lived with a single parent. The majority of Black children (54 percent) lived with a single parent, while 7 percent lived with parents who were cohabiting. And while systemic racism in the forms of disparate incarceration and mortality rates [explain](#) a gender gap of 1.5 million among Black men and women ages 25 to 54 in everyday life, a [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report](#) found higher rates of father-child engagement across a set of activities for Black and Hispanic fathers.

Involvement in activities with children under age 5

- Black fathers (78 percent) were most likely to eat meals with their children every day
- Black fathers (70 percent) were most likely to have bathed, dressed, diapered, or helped their children use the toilet every day
- Black fathers (25 percent) were least likely to have not played with their nonresidential children

Involvement in activities with children aged 5 to 18

- A larger percentage of Hispanic fathers (71 percent) ate meals with their children daily than did white fathers (64 percent)
- A higher percentage of Black fathers aged 15 to 44 (27 percent) took their coresidential children to or from activities every day compared with white fathers (20 percent)
- A larger percentage of Black fathers (41 percent) had helped their coresidential children with homework every day in the last four weeks compared with white fathers (28 percent)

These are the facts. Yet, too often, fathers, families, and communities are forced to navigate systems and structures that do not reflect these realities. They are instead stuck with systems that are designed based on outdated notions about fathers' relationships to their children and family life and their role in the American familial experience, along with racist stereotypes of BIPOC communities.

THE OPPORTUNITY

In order for our systems and structures, policies, and practices to reflect the realities of 21st century families and communities, our collective conceptions of those families and communities must accurately reflect families' lived experiences. Those experiences are increasingly varied and engaged — often despite systemic barriers to engagement. We have an opportunity to reframe narratives across policy, practice, and research to more accurately and positively reflect fathers' roles in families and communities. This includes an opportunity to rethink naming of the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs administered by the the Administration for Children and Families Office of Family Assistance.

THE EXAMPLE

Recommendations from [the FrameWorks Institute](#)

The history of social movements shows that when advocates across organizations, disciplines, and sectors adopt, echo, and amplify effective frames on an issue, their collective voice is able to build momentum and spark change. Drawing on decades of social science research, FrameWorks Institute Senior Advisor Julie Sweetland offered the following recommendations to frame fatherhood in ways that activate productive perceptions of fathers.

- Advance an affirmative vision for fatherhood
Shape our own narrative. Don't pour it into a mold set by others.

Correcting others' mistakes does not work. A study of myth-fact structure found:
 - People misremembered myths as true.
 - Misconception worsened over time.
 - People attributed false information to the entity attempting to rebut the information.
- Zoom out
Paint a picture of the issue that contextualizes it in an environment proximate to your audience.
- Stick to science that promotes the possibilities

Stay away from data that reinforces a deficit-based perspective on dads.

- Replace:
 - Less delinquency/crime
 - Fewer teen pregnancies
 - Less poverty

- Embrace:
 - Stronger cognitive, social skills
 - Healthier relationships
 - Financial stability

These recommendations encourage us to avoid rebutting worn-out myths, centering communications on who's being hurt and how to help them. We should avoid statistics that evoke negative stereotypes and instead advance positive portrayals, center communications on factors that produce the outcomes we seek, and embrace evidence that promotes possibility.

Center for Urban Families

Since 1989, the Center for Urban Families (CFUF) has worked to highlight and support the central role of fathers in families and communities by connecting members to employment and supporting family stability in Baltimore City. CFUF was founded with the belief that supporting fathers' connections with their children, co-parents, and the workforce has the power to dismantle poverty. Leveraging 20 years of impact and applied learnings, CFUF's *All In* approach links individual accountability, person-centered and trauma-informed case management, and support networks with workforce development training, education, and civic engagement to build long-term social and economic prosperity for members, their families, and communities.

Understanding Implicit Bias

Implicit bias refers to the attitudes and stereotypes that guide unconscious beliefs, actions, and decisions. They include favorable and unfavorable sentiments and are activated involuntarily, manifesting in our feelings about individuals or groups of people based on characteristics like race, ethnicity, gender, and age. These sentiments are shaped by exposure to direct and indirect messages about individuals and groups over time.

It's important to note that our implicit biases tend to favor groups with which we identify. But even more importantly, our biases are malleable. Ingrained implicit biases can be unlearned through intentional debiasing efforts.

Learning about implicit bias offers a lens through which we can examine root causes of racial and gender disparities, even in the absence of intent to discriminate or otherwise disenfranchise individuals or groups of people. Understanding our biases better positions us to mitigate and prevent expressions of bias and related outcomes.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University offers several resources — including an [Implicit Bias Module Series](#) — to help individuals and organizations unpack implicit bias and what it