

“We’re Here Too!”

NJ Fathers Share Stories of Barriers, Bias and Invisibility



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The research is clear. Father involvement matters. A lot.

Yet time and time again we heard the same stories from fathers participating in community conversations across the state:

- Programs and supports for fathers are lacking,
- Negative societal stereotypes around fathers persist, and
- A father’s role as a parent is not treated with the same respect as mothers.

Even when services were available, fathers spoke of barriers such as transportation, inconvenient hours, long waitlists, programs that were not relatable or aligned with their lived experiences, and the subtle but powerful feeling of being unwelcome in spaces historically designed for mothers. At each of the conversations, they described navigating 'mother-based systems' that treat fathers as secondary parents.

Despite the growing recognition over the last few decades regarding the critical role of fathers in childbirth and child rearing, the majority of the fathers we spoke with said they've been judged and stigmatized when trying to be more involved in their children's lives.

Why Father Inclusion Matters

A father’s active participation and emotional engagement with his children leads to improved social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes.¹ In numerous studies, positive father involvement is associated with children’s higher academic achievement; greater school readiness; stronger math and verbal skills; greater emotional security; higher self-esteem; fewer behavioral problems; and greater social competence.²

Father involvement during the perinatal period is also an important predictor of maternal and infant health outcomes.³ When fathers are involved, expecting mothers are: more likely to receive early prenatal care; less likely to experience a pre-term birth or deliver a child of low birth weight,⁴ and have higher breastfeeding rates.⁵ Similarly, father’s presence at birth was predictive of several indicators of involvement at 24 months, including direct caregiving activities, financial contribution, involvement in decision making, and linkages to extended family.⁶

In contrast, the absence of a father is linked to childhood poverty⁷ and negative impacts on a child’s social-emotional development.⁸



Given the critical role fathers play in child and maternal outcomes, ACNJ set out to learn more about the experiences of New Jersey fathers residing in under-resourced communities across the state. Through a series of community conversations, fathers were asked to share their experiences, from first learning they were going to be a father to present day. This report reflects a summary of these candid conversations and also proposes some recommendations on what is needed to better support fathers.

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Methodology

Between February 2025 and September 2025, ACNJ hosted 7 virtual and in-person conversations with 64 fathers to learn about what their experiences have been like as a father, from the time they first heard they were going to be a father until now, and to actively involve them in policy and systems change efforts. This work was funded by the Pritzker Children's Initiative (PCI) as part of ACNJ's [Unlocking Potential](#) (UP) initiative. Participants came from our UP focus communities—including Atlantic City, East Orange, Trenton, Bridgeton, and Salem County—as well as Burlington City and Irvington. The initiative also included 2 virtual sessions with fathers in South Jersey and members of the NJ Department of Children and Families' Office of Family Voice DADS Council. The conversation

in Bridgeton was conducted in Spanish and translated for the purposes of this report. The participants were informed that the information gathered will be developed into a report along with a list of recommendations on what can be done to improve and strengthen policies and programs for fathers to be shared with policymakers, funders and state leaders. The participants had at least one child and the ages of the children ranged from newborn to adult children. The conversations were facilitated by men who were dads themselves and had experience working with fathers in various capacities. While specific questions were identified (and vetted by a group of fathers) to help guide the discussion, the conversations were intended to be organic in order to foster genuine connection and understanding of challenges and needs.

Key Findings

1. Resources Specifically for Dads Are Lacking

When participants were asked if they felt there were services specifically designed for fathers available in their community to support them in their parenting role, the overwhelming response, regardless of where the group was held, was a resounding “no.” Father-specific services were either unknown, inaccessible, or non-existent in their communities. As one father expressed, “When my kids were born, I asked the streets questions.”

In fact, only a few fathers that we spoke with reported being referred to a program specifically for Dads, and those who participated often did so through court mandates or child welfare referrals. Voluntary fatherhood support remains rare in their opinion.

“Only programs we got are court ordered classes – programmed me to be a certain way – like a robot. Read this. Talk like this. Be like this. And I had to play the game instead of me being the dad I am.”

One single father shared his difficulty trying to secure space in a homeless shelter for himself and his child. Others shared that programs may exist, but they had never been told about them. “They are hidden resources – maybe they exist but if so, we aren’t informed about them.”

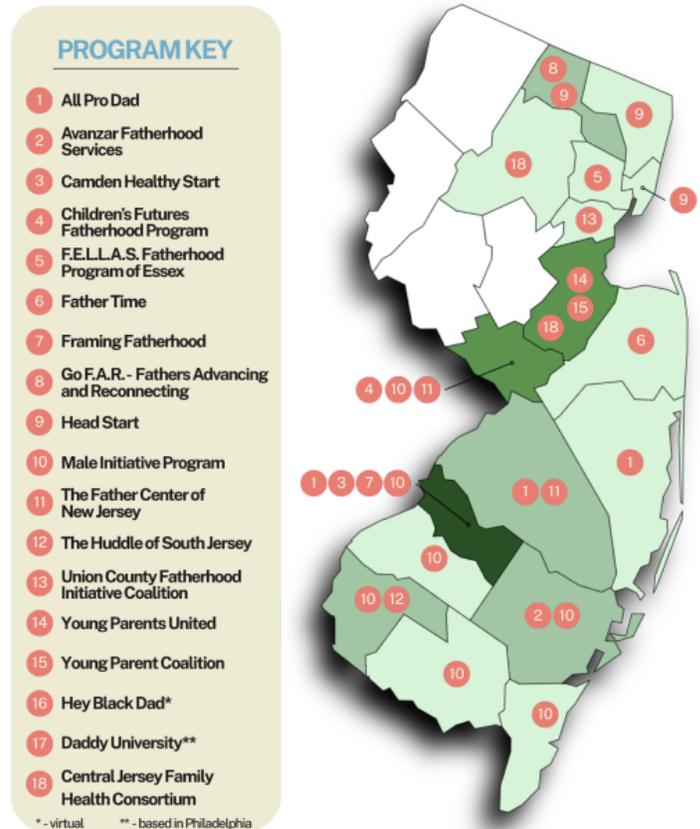
These stories confirm what we know to be true, there are [very few supports](#) designed specifically for fathers in New Jersey.⁹

2. Fathers Face Stigma and Discrimination

Research shows that fathers’ involvement in children’s lives has increased over recent decades, and Black fathers in particular demonstrate high levels of daily engagement when they live with or regularly interact with their children — challenging old stereotypes.¹⁰ However, despite these changes, the majority of the fathers we spoke with said they have been judged and stigmatized by various systems when attempting to play a greater role in their children’s lives.



FATHER-FOCUSED PROGRAMS IN NEW JERSEY



Source: New Jersey American Academy of Pediatrics. (2025, August). *New Jersey fatherhood resource guide*. NJ SEEDlings. <https://njaap.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/NJ-SEEDlings-Fatherhood-Resource-Guide-FINAL.pdf>

“It was always a stigma. Always a negative. I’m still a young dad so when I walk into one of those parent teacher conferences even though I had my dress shirt and tie on, they didn’t care about that ... so basically[endured] the pre-judgement of me until they got to know me.”

3. Mental Health, Stress, and Isolation Among Fathers is High and Unaddressed

Many of the fathers we spoke with also revealed they were battling stress, depression and burnout but felt they had no place to turn to for help. Up to 10% of fathers experience depression in the perinatal period and up to 15% experience perinatal anxiety.¹¹ However, men are less likely to receive a mental health diagnosis than women.¹²

Specifically, participants described how fathers are often seen as the person responsible for protecting and providing for the family and how any deviation from this is seen as weakness. As one father said, “I feel as a man it’s harder to find somewhere to turn to vent or communicate with someone if there is something you want to get off your chest.”

“Sometimes a simple hey how are you doing or a text can go a long way. Knowing there is someone out there who cares is important.”

4. Systems (Courts, Shelters, Child Welfare) are Perceived as Biased Against Fathers

The fathers also shared their experiences with systems such as child support, family courts or Child Protective Services. They expressed a perceived societal preference for mothers over fathers, often describing these systems as adversarial, punitive, and lacking empathy, basically undermining them instead of supporting them to be present and engaged fathers. Only a few could recall being offered support or resources to help them stay connected with their children during difficult times.

“My daughter got taken away from her mother by child welfare the day she was born, I got put on a back burner... I got custody of her now, two years ago. Some people’s experiences are good, but I had the worst experience ever. Like they didn’t help me out with anything, they didn’t give me any resources.”

What Fathers Really Want: Insights from Our Conversations

One thing was clear in all of the conversations we held, the fathers were deeply committed to their children and want to be involved in their children’s lives. Despite many reporting negative experiences with their own father, the dads we spoke with wanted more for their child.

Fathers do not want to be just an afterthought. They want recognition for the critical role they play in their children’s lives—and they want services designed with them in mind. Fathers told us they need accessible, relatable supports including parenting and co-parenting resources, mental health

services, financial planning, job training, and help navigating systems such as family court and child support.

They also want policies that actively strengthen father involvement rather than treating dads as secondary parents. In addition, they would like to see more policies embedded in our systems that acknowledge and actively strengthen father involvement.

“I want to be in my kid’s life. I come from a culture where fathers are more deadbeat than anything else. Culture encourages absent fathers. My role in my kid’s life is more like breaking the convention – a bit unusual.”

“Parenting came from watching my friend’s father and seeing the dynamics of their relationship and wanting that...so I resolved that I would create it with my own children.”

“My mother was on drugs – still on drugs. I was born into dysfunction. All of my sisters’ baby’s fathers are in jail. I want to be different – opposite.”

“Not knowing my dad, not even meeting him, made me want to be there for [my children]. I want to be there for them financially.”

Service Providers Agree

The service providers assisting in the collection of data and creation of this brief agree with the fathers we spoke with - voluntary, prevention-focused supports for fathers, particularly those centered on connection, skill-building, and co-parenting, are limited, difficult to locate, or unavailable in many communities. They consistently observe that the fathers they work with are not disengaged or unwilling to parent. Instead, they are navigating systems that are not built with fathers in mind, and that lack the capacity and resources needed to engage them effectively. They also report that many fathers do not learn about parenting or fatherhood supports until they are already involved with the courts, child welfare, or other enforcement-based systems. By that point, fathers often feel discouraged, judged, or mistrustful of services. These service providers emphasize that supporting fathers requires more than individual programs. It requires coordinated systems and sufficient, sustained investment to ensure services are accessible, consistent, and responsive to fathers’ needs.

“You want to know there are people that share similar experiences to you. There are people who understand, who know what it means and what it feels like to be a father.”

“When you have someone that looks like you or are similar to you, you tend to be more open to listen compared to someone that does not.”

Conclusion

Fathers play an equally critical role in the development of their children. Supporting fathers leads to better outcomes not just for Dads and children, but for mothers as well — especially during the perinatal period.

As such, they need to be included and prioritized in the design, implementation and funding of early childhood supports, services and policies.

In order to more effectively address the needs of fathers, recommendations include:

- Increasing public awareness about the father’s impact on child and maternal health outcomes as well as the need for the family-serving workforce to be more father-inclusive.

- Collecting additional data on the needs and experiences of New Jersey fathers to better understand their health and well-being during their transition to parenthood.
- Investing in fatherhood programs by developing and expanding services statewide.
- More intentionally including fathers in existing state-funded family support initiatives.
- Facilitating policies and practices that encourage, support and strengthen father participation in their children’s lives.

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Endnotes

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