

# “We’re Here Too!”

## NJ Fathers Share Stories of Barriers, Bias and Invisibility

### Executive Summary



ADVOCATES  
for CHILDREN OF NEW JERSEY  
Giving Every Child A Chance®

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#### The research is clear.

#### Father involvement matters. A lot.

When fathers are actively involved and emotionally engaged, their children thrive— it leads to improved social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes.

Father involvement during the perinatal period is also an important predictor of maternal and infant health outcomes.

Yet, time and time again, in conversations held with over 60 fathers of one or more children residing in low-income, marginalized communities, we heard the same stories:

- Programs and supports for fathers are lacking;
- Negative societal stereotypes around fathers persist; and
- Fathers are not treated with the same respect as mothers.

Even when services exist, fathers faced real barriers: transportation issues, inconvenient hours, long waitlists, programs that were unrelatable or not aligned with their lived experiences and the subtle but powerful feeling of being unwelcome in spaces historically designed for mothers. They described navigating 'mother-based systems' that treat fathers as secondary parents. Despite growing recognition of fathers' important role in recent decades, the majority of dads we spoke with said they've been judged and stigmatized when trying to be more involved in their children's lives.

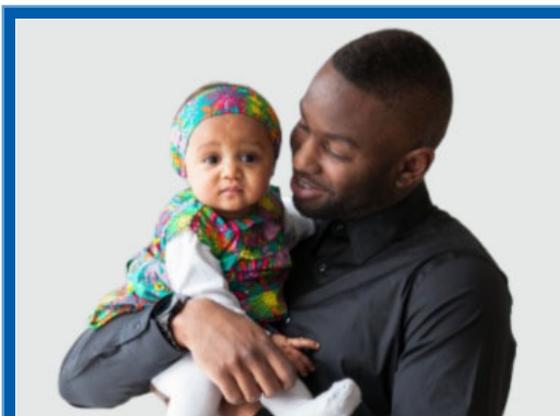
#### What Fathers Want: Insights from Our Conversations

Fathers do not want to be 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. In addition, they would like to see more policies embedded in our systems that acknowledge and actively strengthen father involvement, rather than treating dads as secondary parents.

Since fathers play an equally critical role in the development of their children, they need to be included and prioritized in the design, implementation and funding of early childhood supports, services and policies. Supporting fathers leads to better outcomes not just for dads and children, but for mothers as well —especially during the perinatal period.

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.



Between February and September 2025, ACNJ engaged 64 fathers from under-resourced communities across New Jersey to share their experiences of fatherhood—from the moment they first learned they were expecting until today—and to actively participate 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 virtual sessions with fathers in South Jersey and members of the NJ Department of Children and Families' Office of Family Voice DADS Council.

- **Collecting additional data** on father’s needs and experiences to better understand their health and well-being as they 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.

Read full report at  
<https://www.acnj.org/nifamilyvoices-report>.



1. Garcia, I. L., Fernald, L. C. H., Aboud, F. E., Otieno, R., Alu, E., & Luoto, J. E. (2022). Father involvement and early child development in a low-resource setting. *Social Science & Medicine*, 302, Article 114933. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114933>

2. Walsh, T. B., Carpenter, E., Costanzo, M. A., Howard, L., & Reyniers, R. (2021). Present as a partner and parent: Mothers' and fathers' perspectives on father participation in prenatal care. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 42(3), 386–399. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21920>

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