



ENGAGING FATHERS

STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Jawan Burwell, EdD, CFLE

A large, light gray silhouette of a man holding a child, serving as a background for the text.

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by Jawan M. Burwell, EdD, CFLE


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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to fathers who wholeheartedly embrace the path of early childhood education, demonstrating unwavering dedication and boundless love. Your presence, support, and active involvement profoundly enrich your children's lives and serve as an inspiring example for others. Here's to the champions of fatherhood and advocates for the transformative power of parental engagement who nurture the bright futures of our youngest learners.

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INTRODUCTION

REFRAMING FATHERHOOD IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

As we begin this exploration, we step into a space that is both deeply personal and professionally significant: the role of fathers in early learning environments. This work is not just a collection of ideas. It is a call to action, a reflective mirror, and a strategic guide for educators, leaders, and advocates seeking to foster stronger, more inclusive connections between families and the field of early childhood education.

In early education spaces, much of the conversation around family engagement has traditionally centered on mothers. This maternal focus, while necessary, has unintentionally contributed to the marginalization of fathers. Too often, fathers are cast as peripheral figures in their children's academic and developmental lives, despite growing research that highlights their significant impact. This book seeks to challenge that dynamic and to reposition fathers as essential partners in the educational journey of their children.

Imagine a classroom filled with the joyful chatter of curious children, the rhythmic hum of active learning, and the warm, intentional presence of engaged adults. In this vision, fathers are not strangers to the classroom. They are storytellers, builders, problem-solvers, and co-learners. Their voices are heard during parent-teacher conferences. Their hands are seen during classroom projects. Their hearts are felt in the everyday moments of arrival, departure, and connection.

In today's society, where time is stretched and responsibilities are often divided, the presence of fathers in early childhood settings cannot be left to chance. Fathers are more than financial providers

or occasional volunteers. They bring cultural richness, emotional grounding, and a distinctive lens that enhances the educational experience for all children. Despite the growing number of two-parent households where both caregivers are working, as well as the increasing visibility of single and stay-at-home fathers, many early childhood programs continue to grapple with how to effectively and respectfully engage them.

This book asks a simple yet powerful question: What might be possible if we redesigned our systems, our language, and our expectations to welcome fathers fully into the life of the classroom? To answer that question, we begin by examining how historical narratives and societal norms have shaped our current views of fatherhood. Across centuries and continents, the image of the father has evolved. In ancient cultures, fathers were often seen as moral and educational leaders within the family unit. In more recent history, particularly in Western societies, a shift occurred that emphasized the father's role as the breadwinner, frequently separating him from many daily interactions with young children. These cultural transitions have left an imprint on how fathers view themselves and how early educators interact with them.

It is within this complex tapestry that we locate our discussion. By understanding the history of father engagement, we are better positioned to dismantle outdated paradigms and replace them with practices rooted in inclusivity, equity, and cultural responsiveness. Father engagement is not a one-size-fits-all concept. It varies across communities, cultures, and contexts. What remains consistent is the need for intentionality in how we design early learning environments that affirm, support, and uplift fathers.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book developed out of the research I did for my dissertation, “Preschool Teachers’ Perspectives on Engaging Fathers in Their Child’s Education” (Burwell, 2021). Throughout the chapters that follow, you will encounter a range of voices, from early childhood educators to family members to researchers. These perspectives offer a comprehensive understanding of how father engagement operates in real-life settings and how educators can build bridges instead of barriers. In interviews and conversations with me, preschool teachers graciously shared their experiences, offering candid insights into both the triumphs and challenges they have faced in their efforts to engage fathers. Their stories provide valuable context for the research and strategies presented in this exploration. Additionally, in my work as the director of a university child-development lab school, I have talked with many fathers and father figures about their feelings of welcome and comfort in their child’s classroom. I have included some of their feedback in this book as well.

- **CHAPTER 1:** Father engagement is presented as a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of early childhood education. The discussion emphasizes how fathers' active participation enhances children's academic, social, and emotional development. Historical and cultural shifts in fatherhood from traditional provider roles to active caregiving and educational partnership are explored. We also examine systemic obstacles that constrain father involvement, including gender norms, institutional practices, and limited teacher preparation. Intentional, inclusive strategies in early childhood programs are highlighted as essential for recognizing fathers' contributions and strengthening family-educator partnerships.
- **CHAPTER 2:** We explore preschool teachers' perspectives on father engagement to highlight both opportunities and challenges. Educators recognize the value fathers bring to children's social-emotional growth, academic motivation, and overall well-being yet face constraints such as limited time, training, and resources. Cultural expectations, institutional norms, and gendered assumptions further impact consistent father participation. Supporting teachers with professional development, practical strategies, and policy-level backing fosters authentic partnerships with fathers, resulting in richer, more equitable learning experiences for children.
- **CHAPTER 3:** We share strategies for creating supportive early childhood environments that engage fathers. Inclusive classroom design, collaboration between educators and families, and meaningful daily interactions with fathers are emphasized. These practices strengthen father-child bonds, promote diverse caregiving perspectives, and enhance children's learning experiences while reinforcing home-school connections.
- **CHAPTER 4:** We examine strategies for promoting active father engagement. Schools can foster open communication, meaningful participation, and a welcoming atmosphere that values fathers' unique contributions. Addressing hindrances requires deliberate planning, creativity, and a commitment to inclusivity. Engaged fathers support not only children's academic achievement but also emotional resilience, social competence, and a lifelong love of learning while contributing to a connected and supportive family community.
- **CHAPTER 5:** We explore the importance of professional development for fostering father engagement. Comprehensive, context-sensitive training equips educators with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to involve fathers consistently and effectively. Tailoring programs to urban, suburban, and rural contexts ensures relevance across diverse communities. Supported by policies, leadership, and professional networks, these efforts create inclusive environments where fathers are recognized as essential partners, reshaping how schools perceive and engage them.

- **CHAPTER 6:** We discuss father engagement in early childhood policy as a strategic approach to strengthen families and learning systems. Policies that remove barriers, challenge caregiving assumptions, and provide infrastructure for father involvement support children's academic, emotional, and social development while fostering family stability and community cohesion. Coordinated policies, resources, training, and public messaging can make father engagement a standard practice rather than an exception.
- **CHAPTER 7:** We consider the future of father engagement in early childhood education, emphasizing collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity. Forward-looking approaches address the evolving needs of families and position fathers as active participants in children's learning. Sustained commitment to equitable policies, culturally responsive practices, and accessible support ensures meaningful involvement. Engaged fathers strengthen early learning environments and communities, and ongoing investment in research, strategies, and advocacy will solidify father engagement as a foundational component of high-quality early childhood education.

As we delve into these chapters, we will examine how educators can explore best practices and strategies for engagement, identify gaps in professional development, consider the policy implications that influence program design, and create supportive environments that welcome fathers. The chapters also include inspiring case studies and success stories that demonstrate what engagement can look like when fathers are embraced as partners across a variety of contexts: urban, suburban, rural, military, tribal, bilingual, and university settings. Each chapter concludes with a reflection and a look forward to what lies ahead for the field.

This work is grounded in the belief that all children benefit when all caregivers are welcomed and empowered. Engaging fathers is not simply a box on a family involvement checklist. It is a transformative act that affirms children's identities, strengthens families, and improves outcomes across every developmental domain.

As you engage with the ideas presented in this book, you may be challenged to reconsider long-held assumptions. You may find yourself inspired to try new approaches. You may even be moved to advocate for systemic changes that broaden the definition of family within your own program or institution. Wherever this journey takes you, know that you are contributing to a larger movement—one that seeks to rewrite the narrative of fatherhood in early education with intention, authenticity, and hope. Together, we will discover the boundless opportunities that unfold when family partnerships are inclusive, affirming, and rooted in the shared belief that every child deserves the full support of everyone who loves them.

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING FATHER ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In the tapestry of early childhood education, fathers stand as vital pillars by guiding, supporting, and shaping the formative experiences of their children. Yet, to fully appreciate the role of father engagement, we must first explore its underlying meaning and impact. *Father engagement* refers to the active, consistent involvement of fathers in their children's educational journey. This includes behaviors, attitudes, and interactions that directly influence the learning environment both at home and in school (Martinez-Yarza, Solabarrieta-Eizaguirre, and Santibáñez-Gruber, 2024).

An engaged father is not a passive observer but a proactive contributor, offering encouragement, modeling behaviors, and fostering a love for learning. This involvement is critical during early childhood, a developmental period that lays the foundation for future academic and social success. Research indicates that children with engaged fathers are more likely to demonstrate higher academic achievement, stronger social-emotional skills, and greater overall well-being (McMunn, Martin, Kelly, and Sacker, 2017). Father engagement nurtures not only cognitive growth but also resilience, curiosity, and self-confidence (Cabrera, Shannon, and Tamis-LeMonda, 2007).

To understand father engagement today, we must consider its evolution across history and cultures. Fatherhood has been shaped by societal norms, religious beliefs, and economic structures (Lamb,

2000). While traditional roles have sometimes focused on a father's ability to provide for his family and mete out appropriate discipline, contemporary models now emphasize emotional connection, involvement in daily caregiving, and participation in educational activities.

The idea of father involvement has evolved from simply measuring time spent between father and child to assessing the quality of such interactions. Engagement is now recognized as an important protective factor against behavior problems in children (Goulet, Archambault, Olivier, and Morizot, 2024). In households where mothers are employed, the father's role often expands, requiring greater adaptability and attentiveness to caregiving needs (Pevalin, Wade, and Brannigan, 2003).

ACKNOWLEDGING THE BARRIERS TO FATHER ENGAGEMENT

Despite its importance, father engagement is often hindered by certain systemic barriers that can be categorized into four areas: individual/family factors, child-related issues, teacher-parent dynamics, and broader societal constraints (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

Teachers frequently report difficulty in implementing strategies that actively engage fathers. An empirical study of fathers' participation in preschool programs reported that many fathers rarely or never volunteer, attend meetings, or communicate with teachers (Green, 2003). Anecdotal insights from seasoned educators confirm that father participation is significantly higher during special events or field trips than in routine meetings or conferences.

The reasons for low engagement are multifaceted, including societal expectations, workplace demands, and gendered assumptions in education. Most early childhood programs remain female-dominated and may unintentionally overlook fathers' roles. Initiatives promoting father involvement are often driven by gender equity efforts at the policy level rather than integrated into classroom practice (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).

Fathers bring critical value across developmental domains: physical, emotional, social, and linguistic. However, most programs lack structured, intentional efforts to include them. Instead, opportunities for engagement are often optional and uncoordinated, leaving fathers to self-select their involvement (Green, 2003). Even when fathers express interest, the absence of comprehensive support systems limits their sustained participation (Pleck, 2010).

THE MULTIFACETED IMPACT OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Father involvement influences nearly every aspect of a child's development. According to several research studies, it significantly contributes to children's socio-emotional health, often helping to reduce behavioral problems and emotional distress (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, and Roggman, 2014). Fathers often introduce complementary parenting styles that nurture emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Their guidance provides stability, helping children manage emotional challenges with confidence and security.

Cognitively, children benefit when fathers engage actively in their learning. Studies show higher academic motivation, school readiness, and achievement among children whose fathers are present in their educational lives (Lamb, 2010). Fathers serve as mentors and role models, sparking intellectual curiosity and a love of learning that endures well beyond early childhood.

Social development is also closely tied to father involvement. Children who interact regularly with engaged fathers demonstrate greater empathy, communication skills, and resilience. Fathers help their children learn how to build and maintain relationships, resolve conflicts, and understand their place in the social world.

CASE STUDY

Men Who Matter: Expanding the Meaning of Fatherhood

In a university-affiliated early childhood center, a group of staff began noticing a common pattern that many children were being raised by extended family members or nontraditional caregivers, including uncles, grandfathers, and close family friends. One child, Taye, was being raised by his mother and her best friend, whom Taye affectionately called "Uncle Dre."

While not biologically related to Taye, Uncle Dre was consistently present at drop-offs, volunteered during class parties, and showed up for parent-teacher conferences. Despite this, some staff struggled with how to acknowledge him in family engagement materials or records that assumed traditional parental roles.

A new director initiated a family engagement audit and revised enrollment paperwork to be more inclusive, allowing families to list caregivers beyond the "mother/father" binary. The center also hosted a Men Who Matter breakfast to honor all male figures in children's lives.

Uncle Dre was invited to speak, and he shared how he committed to helping raise Taye after his best friend became a single parent during college.

His authenticity and love resonated deeply with other families and staff. The event changed the tone of the center's family engagement efforts and created a more welcoming environment. It reminded the community that impactful fatherhood is defined not by DNA but by dedication, presence, and care.

Importantly, the presence of an involved father or father figure offers children a sense of belonging and identity. This emotional anchor equips them to face life's challenges with greater self-assurance. In this way, father engagement not only influences a child's present but also helps to shape the trajectory of their future.

To engage fathers more in their children's early education, it's important to identify the challenges faced by preschool teachers. The reality is that many fathers are not participating as much as they could, and teachers have limited resources and expertise to increase father engagement.

Fathers are more likely to engage in their child's learning and development when supported and included in father-based intervention groups (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Building stronger relationships and increasing engagement opportunities for fathers will build the foundation for a better understanding of how teachers can help bridge the gap between home and school (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

SUCCESS STORY

Luis's Early Literacy Champions Program

In my work with early childhood literacy programs, I observed Luis, a father of a three-year-old boy, noticing that some men stayed on the sidelines during reading activities. He wanted to help change that, showing how enthusiasm and encouragement could make a difference. He cared deeply about reading and wanted other fathers to feel confident enough to join in. To address this, he collaborated with teachers to create an Early Literacy Champions program, where fathers received training on how to read aloud effectively and use storytelling

techniques. The program included take-home books and materials designed to foster interactive reading experiences.

Through this program, fathers became more confident reading with their children, which improved children's language development and enthusiasm for learning. Luis's work underscored the importance of equipping fathers with skills and resources, and fostering inclusive family partnerships centered on early literacy.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The role of fathers in early childhood education is essential yet often overlooked. *Father engagement*, defined as active and meaningful participation by fathers in a child's learning and development, has a powerful influence on academic achievement, emotional well-being, and social competence. However, systemic barriers, societal expectations, and limited support for teachers often hinder fathers' involvement. By recognizing these challenges and considering educators' perspectives, programs can begin to bridge the gap between home and school. Strengthening teacher-father relationships, creating inclusive practices, and offering professional development opportunities are critical steps toward building supportive environments where fathers feel welcomed and valued. Engaging fathers more intentionally lays the foundation for stronger outcomes not only for children and families but for the early education system as a whole.

ENGAGING FATHERS, EMPOWERING FAMILIES

Fathers play a critical, yet often overlooked, role in the early education of their children. Author Jawan Burwell, EdD, CFLE, addresses the barriers that prevent many fathers—particularly Black and other fathers of color—from participating fully in early childhood programs. Drawing on research and the author’s direct experience, this book provides educators with actionable strategies to create more inclusive classrooms and foster authentic partnerships with fathers. With a focus on practical implementation, Burwell highlights the importance of understanding family dynamics, challenging societal assumptions, and reshaping engagement practices to reach all caregivers.

DISCOVER HOW TO:

- Identify and dismantle common barriers to father engagement
- Build inclusive family-engagement practices that value children’s important adults
- Connect father participation to improved child outcomes
- Create welcoming classroom environments for fathers of all backgrounds
- Recognize and address societal and cultural assumptions
- Promote trust and sustained father involvement through communication and outreach



ENGAGING FATHERS IS YOUR GO-TO GUIDE FOR FOSTERING EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FATHERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS.



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