

Introduction to Father Engagement Week 2013

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes

Hello! I'm Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, Director of the Office of Head Start, and I want to welcome you to Father Engagement Week. Head Start has a long history of recognizing fathers and male family members as important contributors to the school readiness of children and the well-being of families. Fathers are critical partners in achieving positive outcomes for children in our programs. One Head Start father said it best when he put it this way: "When the program makes the effort to connect with fathers, with parents, a partnership between the staff and the father is formed. This partnership is a powerful bond and is an opportunity to do amazing things and go amazing places with children."

In our programs, meaningful relationships with fathers are possible when staff know: that bonding between fathers and their babies is important and can promote brain development; that fathers have expertise about their children; that fathers are individuals and have different roles in their children's lives; and that some fathers may need different kinds of support to fully embrace their roles as their child's first and lifelong educators.

In Head Start and Early Head Start, father engagement is a vital and integrated part of parent, family, and community work in Head Start and Early Head Start. Father engagement means that fathers and Head Start professionals partner with one another in the child's best interest. It means that fathers take their place alongside Head Start staff in the education of their children, combining their knowledge about their child with staff's knowledge. It means that program governance is shared by Head Start staff and parents, including fathers. It means that both mothers and fathers have opportunities to work with Head Start staff to consider individual, family, and child goals.

During Father Engagement Week, we're excited to offer some new resources related to supporting and partnering with fathers. These resources highlight practices that can be built into your work and enhance the quality of your efforts with fathers and families. For example, this week we'll be releasing the Office of Head Start Father Engagement Birth to 5 Programming Guide. This guide uses the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework to share best practices for father engagement.

In addition, we'll be holding a webinar on father engagement and sharing two videos that highlight some best practices in partnering with fathers. And finally, we'll share a staff training and support group curriculum for working with Latino fathers and families called Las Manos de Apa. These resources include practices and strategies for all staff in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. This includes directors, parent leaders, and managers who share program policies and procedures; and it includes teachers, family service workers, home visitors, health and transportation providers, and fatherhood coordinators.

Rather than a stand-alone initiative or the work of a single fatherhood coordinator, father engagement is everybody's business. Keep in mind that father engagement need not be a stand-alone initiative or a specially designed program. To that end, these resources highlight strategies for building father-friendly environments and they provide extensive information about the competencies needed for building effective relationships with fathers in our programs. Engaging fathers and expectant fathers is an important part of making Head Start and Early Head Start successful for young children.

Father Engagement Week signifies the permanent availability of these new fatherhood resources on the ECLKC. Please use them to build upon the collaborations you've already established with fathers, families, and community partners. And thank you for the work you do every day to partner with families and support children's school readiness.