



PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR APPLYING TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES TO FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

By Samantha Wulfsohn | SEPTEMBER 2023

In recent years, fatherhood programs and other social service providers have become more aware of how traumatic experiences can impact program participants.¹ However, there is still a need to ensure that practitioners incorporate recognized trauma-informed practices into their services. This brief provides practical information and easy-to-use tools designed to support trauma-informed practices in a fatherhood program context. These tools, plus a list of additional resources, can help organizations create healing experiences for fathers, mitigate the effects of previously experienced trauma, and avoid exposing fathers to similar experiences or events that could inadvertently result in retraumatization.

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.²

Background

Many of the men who participate in fatherhood programs may have experienced trauma from adverse childhood experiences, community violence, or incarceration.³ Traumatic experiences can have a negative impact on fathers' own functioning as well as on their children's well-being, particularly for men of color or those with low incomes.⁴ Men are more likely than women to underreport traumatic experiences and are less likely to seek help for issues that may result from experiencing trauma, including aggressive behavior and substance misuse.⁵ Unaddressed childhood trauma and ongoing traumatic experiences in adulthood can impede a father's ability to engage in and benefit from fatherhood support services. Given these impacts, it is critical for fatherhood programs to adopt a trauma-informed approach.⁶

Trauma-Informed Strategies

This brief looks at three trauma-informed strategies that fatherhood programs can use to better support fathers who may have been affected by traumatic experiences:

- **UNIVERSAL SUPPORT** to bolster resilience and help mitigate the effects of trauma for all fathers attending a program.
- **TARGETED SUPPORT** for individuals who may need additional trauma-related assistance within the program.
- **INTENSIVE SUPPORT** for participants who need additional therapeutic assistance.

Each strategy examined below includes a **Learn** component that describes the approach, a **Do** component with tools and tips for implementing that approach, and a **Reflect** component to review how using the approach went. See the Implementation Toolbox on page 6 for all of the tools offered in this brief.

Universal Support

LEARN: How to de-stress the program environment so fathers feel physically and emotionally safe.

Because trauma is often experienced as something that is threatening to an individual's physical and emotional well-being, addressing the issue of safety is an essential component of a trauma-informed approach within all program settings.⁷ For individuals who have experienced trauma, it is important to create an environment that offers both emotional and physical safety.⁸ An emotionally safe setting accepts and acknowledges all feelings, even those that are negative. This is particularly relevant when working with men who may have been socialized to suppress strong emotions and downplay the effects of trauma.

Additionally, fathers can be retraumatized if they encounter situations that consciously or unconsciously prompt a memory of an earlier traumatic event. These can be everyday occurrences like unexpected loud noises, bright lights, confining physical spaces, or difficult interactions with others. Therefore, safe environments are not just free of real, physical dangers. They also offer settings that won't provoke a trauma response caused by stress-inducing interactions or overwhelming stimuli. Practitioners can make an intentional effort to de-stress the environment from the moment fathers are welcomed into the program and continue such efforts throughout the fathers' experiences with program services so they feel both physically and emotionally safe.

DO: Explore ways to assess and improve how the program ensures the emotional and physical safety of fathers during program participation.

Use the Program Environment Assessment Tool (see Tool 1) to assess the emotional and physical safety of your program environment and determine what improvements or additions may be needed. Create a list of next steps for each area that needs improvement and assign a staff member to be responsible for completing those steps.

REFLECT: Consider the effectiveness of the applied changes.

Use the Program Environment Improvement Tracker (see Tool 2) and take time to look back on what you've done to de-stress your program's environment. This can help you stay accountable and review how well it's going. Consider asking program participants for their feedback on any of the changes that you have made.

Targeted Support

LEARN: How to help fathers with self-regulation of their emotional and behavioral reactions.

Even within a thoughtfully de-stressed environment, there may still be situations and stressors that can inadvertently provoke strong emotional and behavioral reactions from fathers who have experienced trauma. If a father encounters something that consciously or unconsciously reminds him of a traumatic event, he may react with an automatic “fight, flight, or freeze” response that will be expressed in his behavioral, affective, or cognitive reactions to the situation.⁹ For instance, he may express a fight response and become confrontational in the face of something that feels threatening, or he may freeze and refrain from participating during a workshop. While such behavior may be considered problematic, it can be an adaptive response to a triggering event and reflect a father's coping strategy for dealing with it.

Even seemingly small stressors can lead to challenges with self-regulation of emotions or behaviors. However, there are strategies that fatherhood programs can use to help participants become more aware of their reactions and develop adaptive responses.¹⁰ **How staff members respond in these moments of stress or conflict may be the difference between a father's positive, healing experience and a situation that escalates and may retraumatize him.**¹¹ For example, if trauma-related responses arise in workshops or other contexts, staff members can offer participants private physical and emotional space so they can regain control, building the message into group norms that it is okay to step away and return. Approaching fathers with empathy, compassion, and a healing mindset in these situations may require a shift in attitude to one that starts with positive assumptions and allows staff members to reframe their thinking from “problematic behavior” to “coping behavior.” Staff members can learn to recognize how *they* feel in these situations and come to these interactions emotionally calm. **It's easier to help fathers who are not calm if all staff members, including case workers, trainers, and administrators, are calm themselves.** Finally, warm, responsive relationships with fathers can help support self-regulation in the face of stress.¹² By building positive relationships with fathers

early in the process, staff members can set themselves up to be supportive during stressful moments.

DO: Help staff members be prepared to respond calmly in moments of stress and share resources with fathers that can help them learn how to use self-care strategies that fit the moment.

- Review the Self-Regulation Action Plan (see Tool 3) and ask key staff members to review it as well.
- Customize the tool using staff input to ensure that it fits their needs and those of the fathers participating in your program.
- Give staff members an opportunity to complete and use the tool to support their own self-regulation when they are responding to fathers' distress.
- Encourage and support your staff so they can share the tool with fathers as a resource and offer problem-solving suggestions for fathers who are having difficulty in the moment.

REFLECT: Take a moment to consider how you have adapted and used the Self-Regulation tool to support fathers.

Use the Self-Regulation Implementation Checklist (see Tool 4) to note the things you have accomplished and circle anything left to do.

Intensive Support

LEARN: How to help and where to refer fathers who need more intensive or therapeutic services.

There are cases in which fathers may need more intensive services that directly address trauma-related issues. Programs can provide staff members with screening tools to facilitate conversations with fathers and help them determine if they would like more time to address trauma-related issues.¹³ **Knowing where to refer program participants for appropriate behavioral health, substance abuse treatment, and trauma-specific educational services can smooth that process.** This may involve finding the services within the existing agency or building partnerships with other community organizations or qualified mental health providers who are trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and know how to deliver evidence-based, trauma-specific interventions. Program leaders can also forge partnerships with mental health providers and other experts who can make training available to staff members and support the integration of trauma-informed practices into ongoing case consultation.

It may take some leg work to find the right providers or programs, connect with the right point person, and then keep lines of communication open to support an ongoing partnership. Once a

program has some partnerships established, however, it will be easier to connect fathers to the services they need. Additionally, by anticipating possible barriers to treatment, staff members can be ready to help fathers identify and problem-solve strategies to address any challenges they may encounter along the way.

DO: Develop a strategy for building partnerships with organizations that offer trauma-related treatment.

Use the Mental Health Referral Services Tip Sheet (see Tool 5) to create a referral network and system for outreach, including connecting with the right service providers and maintaining ongoing relationships with them.

REFLECT: Stay organized and monitor your efforts.

Use the Mental Health Referral Services Tracker (see Tool 6) to see how your efforts are going to build ongoing relationships with therapeutic service providers in your community.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLBOX

TOOL 1. Program Environment Assessment

Program Practices	Rating of Practice 1. Need to add 2. Need to Improve 3. Is Going Well	Next Steps
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FIRST IMPRESSIONS¹⁴

Fathers enter a physical space that is welcoming, warm, and homey. For example, it has comfortable chairs, pictures, plants, and quiet music playing in the background.

Actions: _____

Who: _____

Walls are decorated with photos, posters, and images that are culturally relevant, reflect fathers' experiences, celebrate the successes of clients, are strengths-based, and set a welcoming tone.¹⁵

Actions: _____

Who: _____

The first person a father encounters when he arrives at the program is friendly, asks for his name, and greets him by name with a smile.

Actions: _____

Who: _____

Intake forms have been reviewed for questions that can trigger an emotional or behavioral response, and staff members are prepared to talk to fathers about what they need during early intake conversations.

Actions: _____

Who: _____

Program Practices	Rating of Practice 1. Need to add 2. Need to Improve 3. Is Going Well	Next Steps
Intake forms are not too long and begin with the more challenging questions, so fathers have more emotional energy to respond before tiring from the process.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____

CRITICAL INFORMATION

Fathers are given a calendar of activities that have a predictable routine, so they know what to expect from each day with few surprises.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____
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Resources with information on mental health, substance use, resilience, and other relevant issues are visible and readily available.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____
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Clear, easy-to-read written policies about confidentiality and privacy exist and are shared with participants.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____
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DAILY SUPPORT

There are private, quiet, comfortable places for fathers to sit, relax, and recharge between workshops and meetings.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____
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Program Practices	Rating of Practice 1. Need to add 2. Need to Improve 3. Is Going Well	Next Steps
Fathers have opportunities to interact with peers in an informal way and build natural support networks with people who have had experiences similar to theirs.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____
There are ways to celebrate fathers' accomplishments and acknowledge small successes.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____
There are private places where fathers can talk to staff members about difficult subjects and know that the conversation is confidential.	_____	Actions: _____ _____ _____ _____ Who: _____

TOOL 2. Program Environment Improvement Tracker

De-Stress Strategy Implemented	Date Implemented	Progress / Next Steps
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

TOOL 3. Self-Regulation Action Plan

TIPS FOR STAFF MEMBERS AND FATHERS

Here are some examples of things that staff members and fathers can do to support their self-regulation during stressful situations. There is space to add other ideas that may be uniquely useful to individual staff members and fathers.¹⁶

WHAT STAFF MEMBERS CAN DO:

Plan ahead.

- Anticipate how to respond before a stressful situation arises.
- Shift your mindset from “problematic behaviors” to “coping behaviors.”
- Build strong, positive relationships with fathers early on.
- _____

Practice quick response tricks for moments when a father is experiencing stress.

- Remind yourself, “This father needs my support, so I need to stay calm.”
- Take some calming breaths.
- Try not to take it personally.
- _____

Help fathers recover from stressful situations and become calm.

- Use a calm voice to acknowledge the emotions a father is feeling.
- Ask the father, “How can I help?” or “What do you need from me?”
- Walk away for a moment to give the father space or gently guide him away from the stressful situation.
- Remain quietly by the father’s side as a supportive presence.
- _____

Practice [self-care activities](#) that promote your own well-being and allow you to continue being there for the fathers.

- Make time for breaks at work.
- Engage in healthy habits such as getting adequate sleep, eating a healthy diet, and exercising on a regular basis.
- Make time for family and friends.
- Meditate.
- _____

WHAT FATHERS CAN DO:

Plan ahead.

- Anticipate ways to respond before entering a stressful situation.
- Identify a support person such as a family member, friend, or fatherhood staff person you can call on if needed.
- Picture yourself in a calm state.
- Give yourself an encouraging message.
- _____

Practice quick response techniques for when you are in a stressful situation.

- Use a breathing strategy.
- Give yourself calming messages.
- Walk away from the situation.
- _____

Take time to recover after a stressful situation.

- Connect with a support person.
- Sit down in a quiet place away from others.
- Take a walk.
- _____

Practice self-care activities that promote your well-being and resilience and help you be there for your children.

- Engage in healthy habits such as getting adequate sleep, eating a healthy diet, limiting social media screen time, and exercising on a regular basis.
- Make time for family and friends.
- Meditate.
- _____

TOOL 4. Self-Regulation Implementation Checklist

- Share the Self-Regulation Tool with staff members to review and give input on the content.
- Customize information for your program.
- Create a shareable document that is visually appealing and easy to use.
- Give staff members time to plan and practice how they will use this resource.
- Determine how best to share the resource with fathers.
- Set up a meeting with staff members to discuss ways to reinforce the strategies with fathers.
- Find opportunities to practice, share, and reinforce strategies.
- Figure out the best way to get feedback from fathers on what works and what doesn't.
- Other Ideas _____

TOOL 5. Mental Health Referral Services Tip Sheet

Use this sheet to create a referral network and system for outreach to service providers in your community.¹⁷

ESTABLISH AN OUTREACH PLAN FOR YOUR AGENCY.

- Assign roles and determine who will take the lead.
- Develop a plan for how to stay coordinated and engaged with potential partners.
- Develop a regular progress report using a tracker.

UNDERSTAND THE OPTIONS

- Identify and learn about relevant services offered in another division or department within your agency.
- Identify community organizations or qualified mental health providers who offer mental health, psychoeducational, and substance abuse treatment.
- Ensure that the treatment programs are trauma-informed and culturally responsive.
- Document details about potential partners.
- Ask fathers what they are looking for and be ready to describe and share those needs as you build a referral network.

DEVELOP LINKS WITH ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS PROVIDING NEEDED SERVICES

- Identify a key contact within each agency.
- Make introductions by email and follow up with a brief phone call.
- Exchange mission statements and any documentation related to how you incorporate trauma-informed approaches into your program.
- Try to better understand the context of the services, including areas of expertise, types of services offered (including culturally responsive approaches), waitlists, and insurance coverage/costs.

DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO STAY COORDINATED AND ENGAGED WITH THESE SERVICE PROVIDERS.

- Create a referral form and a strategy to support fathers' engagement in services.
- Explain the available services to fathers and obtain their agreement and written permission.
- Plan for ongoing communication with service providers and fathers.
- Explore ways of bringing a referral partner to your agency to provide training or share expertise.
- Develop an agreement for mental health providers to come to your program on a regular basis to provide individual or group services onsite.
- Set up a regular review meeting with your team and fathers to review progress, understand barriers to accessing services, and adapt your plan.
- Develop strategies with input from fathers to address roadblocks and ensure continued access to services.

TOOL 6. Mental Health Referral Services Tracker

Primary Contact in the Fatherhood Program	Organization Name/Primary Contact	Services Provided	Date of First Contact	Follow-Up Steps
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1.

2.

3.

Additional Resources

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

- [Trauma-Informed Approaches and Awareness for Programs Working with Fathers](#)
- [Understanding Trauma-Informed Programming](#)
- [Let's Talk About Mental Health](#)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

- [Coping with Traumatic Events](#)
- [Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care](#)
- [National Strategy for Trauma-Informed Care Operating Plan](#)
- [SAMSHA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)

National Fund for Workforce Solutions

- [A Trauma-Informed Approach to Workforce: An Introductory Guide for Employers and Workforce Development Organizations](#)

Child-Focused Resources

- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative \(NCTSI\)](#) (web page)

Notes and References

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7. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014).
8. Dion, LaFlair, Azur, Morzuch, and D’Angelo (2018).
9. Jane Elizabeth Sanders, “Teaching Note—Trauma-Informed Teaching in Social Work Education,” *Journal of Social Work Education* 57, 1 (2021): 197–204.
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11. Dion, LaFlair, Azur, Morzuch, and D’Angelo (2018).
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13. Institute for Child and Family Well-Being, “Issue Brief: Trauma Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (T-SBIRT)” (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017). Website: <https://uwm.edu/icfw/wp-content/uploads/sites/384/2018/08/TSBIRT.pdf>, 2017.

14. Adapted from Dina Israel, Samantha Wulfsohn, Frieda Molina, and Donna Wharton-Fields, “First Impressions Matter: Tips to Keep Participants Coming Back for More,” September (New York: MDRC, 2019).
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