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Strong Starts Court Initiative

A PROGRAM OF THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE INNOVATION



Practice Guide: Tips from the Field ***Improving Engagement for Family Court-Involved Fathers with Very Young Children***

Fathers are often overlooked by the child welfare system, which can discourage them from engaging with the Court and other professionals. They may face many of the same systemic barriers as mothers or other system-involved caregivers. However, fathers, and especially young fathers with very young children, experience unique challenges to engagement because of societal and cultural biases surrounding fatherhood. It is critical to meaningfully engage fathers not only to connect them with resources to address their own needs, but also to support the development of healthy attachment relationships with their very young children.

The following strategies were drawn from discussions at Steering Committee meetings in each of the six counties where Strong Starts has a presence to help overcome some of these barriers and promote the wellbeing and engagement of system-involved fathers with young children. These strategies are intended for professionals who work with child welfare involved families. However, many of these strategies can be applied broadly across disciplines and they should be modified as needed according to one's role and relationship to the parent.

Become an Active Participant in Dismantling Stigmas and Biases Around Fathers and Their Role

It is important to engage in self-reflective practice to examine and dismantle any implicit biases which could negatively affect your approach to working with fathers. This includes checking yourself against common assumptions that the father may not want to be involved or that he is a secondary caregiver. Especially for young fathers, it is important to be aware of societal preconceptions which may reinforce negative views during a time in which a young father may still be developing. Using inclusive language counteracts stereotypes, makes fathers feel heard, and helps to build trust .

Include Fathers at the Beginning of the Process

Fathers are often overlooked early in Family Court cases. Prioritizing outreach and including them in planning supports the child's attachment to both parents.

Work with all parties to resolve paternity questions as early on as possible:

When paternity is in question, establishing who the child's father is should be a priority so that the child establishes regular contact to develop a healthy attachment relationship with him. Consider the paternal side of the family who may be able to support visits with the child and support the child and father through the court process.

Identify ways for fathers who are incarcerated to participate in permanency planning and other related meetings from the outset:

When appropriate, it's important to involve those fathers who are incarcerated in the beginning of the planning process and create ways for them to engage with their children. For very young children, this is especially important so that the child has the opportunity to form an attachment with their father early on. For additional strategies to support meaningful, parent-child time see *Practice Guide: Supporting Parent-Child Visits for Young Children*.

Incorporate Fathers in the Child(ren)'s Service Planning

It is important to be aware of how caregiving responsibilities are allocated in each family as it may differ. Do not assume that the majority of the caregiving responsibility is with the mother as it is important to challenge gender biases which can limit a father's involvement in caregiving. It is also important to ensure that the child's services are accessible to the father and provide opportunities for the father to be involved with the child in caregiving activities like pediatric appointments or school activities. For example, if a father works long hours and cannot make daytime parenting classes, offering evening or virtual options could make a big difference. These activities provide bonding and attachment opportunities for the child and can be especially important if the child is in out-of-home care.

Increase and Tailor Services Available for Fathers

While there are many barriers for all parents to engage in high-quality services, there are unique barriers for fathers when navigating services both in and out of the child welfare system. Creating a more equitable service landscape where there is father-specific programming can help support their success and promote healthy relationships with their children.

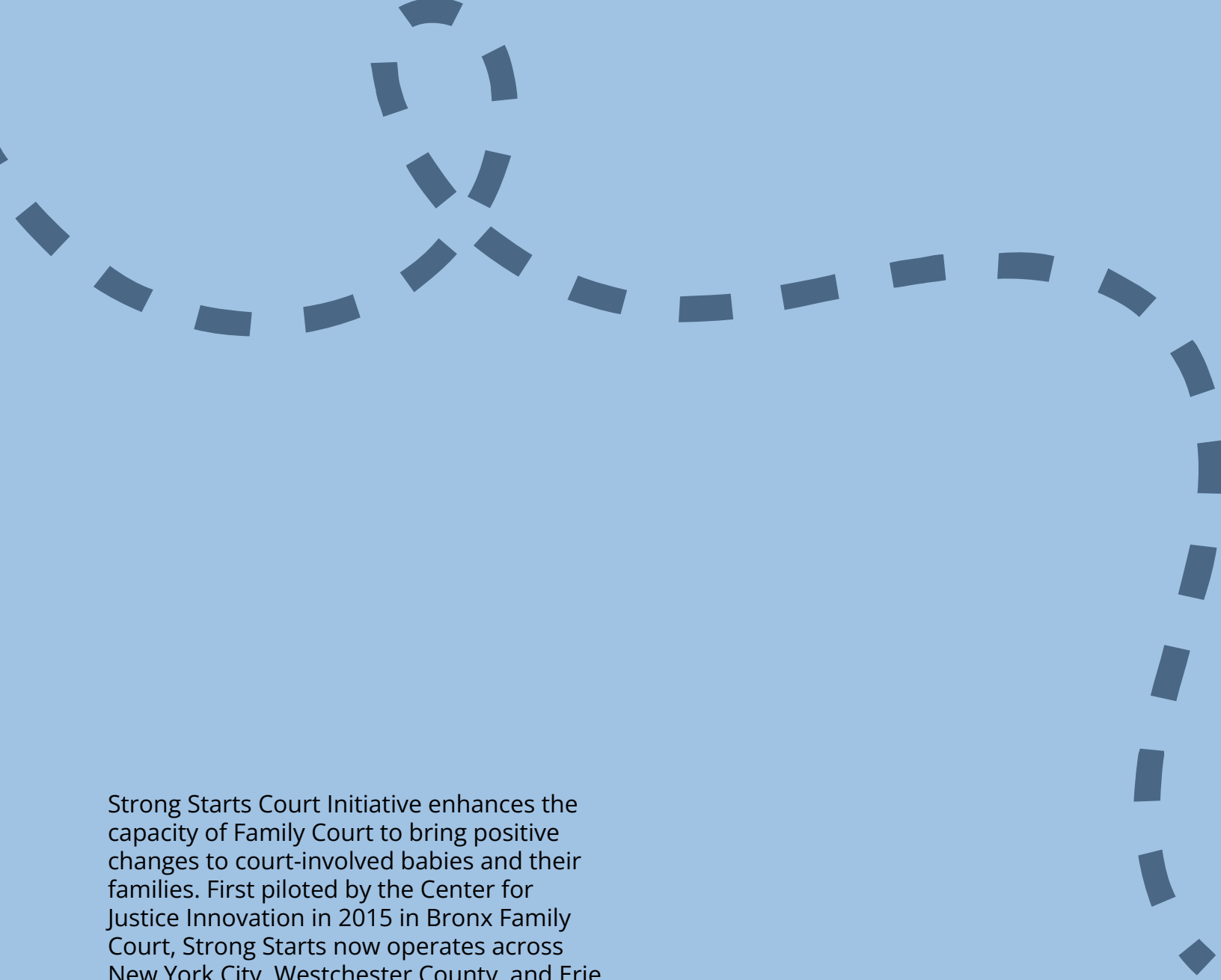
Assign male service providers and case workers to fathers to overcome relatability hurdles where appropriate: Sometimes, pairing fathers with other male service providers or case workers can create a more welcoming atmosphere and can make a father feel more comfortable in the initial stages of service provision.

Increase access to fatherhood support groups or peer advocates: Increasing the number of peer advocates with lived experience in your organization can help a father feel more comfortable in navigating the child welfare system. In addition to making fathers feel more comfortable, peer advocates can provide information about the different processes and connect them to resources that traditionally might not be utilized.

Explore and engage paternal relatives or the father's support network to support consistent engagement in services: It may be helpful to utilize outside support from those with whom a father already has a trusting relationship to make it easier for the father to engage in services. This may also be helpful in ensuring that the father has support after the court case has ended and to prevent further system involvement.

Provide Education for Professionals in Engaging Fathers

Assumptions about the role of the father in childcare, early intervention, school, and medical care can lead to fathers being excluded from these important activities. If a young child is separated from their father, participating in these activities can provide critical bonding opportunities. Providing education for professionals in school and other caregiving settings is critical to promoting positive outcomes for the child, father, and family as a whole.



Strong Starts Court Initiative enhances the capacity of Family Court to bring positive changes to court-involved babies and their families. First piloted by the Center for Justice Innovation in 2015 in Bronx Family Court, Strong Starts now operates across New York City, Westchester County, and Erie County bringing expertise in early child development to all stages of Family Court proceedings and supports infants, toddlers, caregivers, and families so that the court becomes a catalyst for positive change in the lives of the youngest children.

Strong Starts regularly convenes its stakeholders to discuss and strategize ways to improve practice for child welfare-involved families with very young children through county-based Steering Committee meetings. For more information on these meetings or project, visit the [Center's website](#) or reach out to strongstarts@innovatingjustice.org.

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