THE FATHER FACTOR

A Critical Link in Building Family Prosperity

The role of fathers and how we view and value them in America is changing. Over the past decades, fathers have been alternately valued, ignored, or demonized by programs and policies, with clear consequences to families, particularly in communities of color. Today, we have an opportunity to rethink, retool, and re-energize the national movement on fatherhood, recognizing both the vital role of mothers and the impact of fathers on families and communities. We must redefine our public and private systems and services to meet the needs of 21st-century families.

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(L to R: Jesus Benitez, mentor coordinator, CUNY Graduate Center and Michael Nestor, father)
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In fall 2018, Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the GOOD+ Foundation convened fathers, researchers, thought leaders, policymakers, and practitioners to explore "The Father Factor: A Critical Link in Building Family Prosperity." The convening was born of the recognition that while the important role of fathers in society has been increasingly documented in recent research and by experts working with families, it has not gotten the attention it needs from a broader range of policymakers, practitioners, and funders.

Together, we unpacked questions like: What situations and circumstances prevent fathers from being fully engaged in the lives of their children? What are the hallmarks of engaging fathers effectively? How should we think about reimagining public systems and services to work for 21st-century families?

This brief summarizes answers to these questions and highlights innovations from GOOD+ grantees and Ascend Fellows and Network Partners. These leaders are reshaping family narratives to elevate the importance of mothers and fathers in children's lives, building new and adapting old education and career pathways to serve fathers and families more holistically, creating opportunities for justice-involved fathers as they re-enter communities, and so much more.

Ascend and the GOOD+ Foundation share a commitment to the prosperity and well-being of children and their parents. In working to build pathways to opportunity for families, we have always supported the dreams of mothers and their children. As our work has evolved, we have come to better understand the need to invest in fathers as well. In the coming months, we will build on the partnerships and lessons of the Father Factor convening by releasing a series of policy briefs on child support that complement GOOD+'s investment in father-serving organizations and the father-focused work within Ascend's national network.

We hope this brief inspires you to consider and share how your strategies to move families toward opportunity are engaging fathers.

Sincerely,

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Introduction

This report summarizes critical themes and practical examples that surfaced at "The Father Factor — A Critical Link in Building Strong Families and Communities" convening organized by Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the GOOD+ Foundation in November 2018. The convening explored opportunities and challenges to increasing father engagement for the well-being of children, families, and communities. The focus on fatherhood is intended to complement the essential role that mothers play in families and communities. Mothers, particularly single mothers, bear a disproportionate share of familial responsibilities throughout our communities. By recognizing the role fathers play, Ascend and GOOD+ seek to expand the support available to mothers, children, and families and build relationships that help children thrive.

The report is organized into five sections:

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"BECAUSE OF [CUNY FATHERHOOD ACADEMY], I GOT MY GED AND WAS ABLE TO EXPLORE THE IDEA OF GOING TO COLLEGE.... I DIDN'T THINK COLLEGE WAS FOR ME. I THOUGHT SCHOLARSHIPS DIDN'T EXIST FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME, BUT BEING HERE HELPED ME EXPLORE A DIFFERENT ROUTE.... I ENDED UP GRADUATING FROM LAGUARDIA [COMMUNITY COLLEGE] AND AM NOW AT [THE] CITY COLLEGE [OF NEW YORK] FINISHING MY BACHELOR'S IN PHILOSOPHY AND HOPEFULLY GETTING MY PHD CANDIDACY AS A PHILOSOPHY MAJOR."

- Jesus Benitez, mentor coordinator, CUNY Graduate Center

Family Narratives: Mothers, Fathers, and Perceptions of Family

The idea of Father's Day was conceived just over a century ago by Sonora Dodd of Spokane, Washington, while she listened to a Mother's Day sermon in 1909. Dodd wanted a special day to honor her father, William Smart, a widowed Civil War veteran raising his six children on a family farm.

But in the century since, we have created an environment that often positions fathers as secondary, nonessential actors in children's overall well-being. For the GOOD+ Foundation, Ascend, and our partners who for years have been working to put families with low incomes on paths to economic security, educational success, and health and well-being, we know that fathers are often essential to a family's well-being. We all recognize the simple truth that the more we invest in fathers, the greater impact we see on children and families as a whole. Investments in fathers complement the long-standing commitments we maintain to mothers.

"OUR FAILURE TO HELP MEN BECOME STRONG FATHERS TODAY SETS IN MOTION A SERIES OF NEGATIVE OUTCOMES THAT WILL LIKELY LAST DECADES. IN BETTER ENGAGING FATHERS, WE DREAM OF GIVING MOMS — WHOSE RESPONSIBILITIES AND STRESS ARE ENDLESS — AN ENGAGED CO-PARENT AND GIVING DADS THE OPPORTUNITY AND ABILITY TO FEEL ANCHORED TO THEIR CHILDREN."

- Jessica Seinfeld, founder, GOOD+ Foundation

Of the estimated 70 million fathers in America, 2 million were single fathers in 2013, accounting for 17 percent of all custodial single parents in America. In spring 2011, 18 percent of the nation's preschool-aged children were regularly cared for by their father during their mother's working hours. (National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse)

Recent American familial trends have contributed to an increase in co-parenting partnerships between parents. The share of children born to unmarried parents was 43 percent in 2013, up from 21 percent in 1980 and representing 25 percent of all US births in 2016. The prevalence of marriage more generally has also declined since the mid-20th century, and cohabiting unions now tend to be shorter in duration. These factors as well as benefit policies that penalize two-parent households have led to more co-

parenting arrangements that must be acknowledged and supported in today's America. (Population Reference Bureau)

Public perception around families, how families define themselves, and the parenting roles of fathers, mothers, and other caregivers are shaped by multiple contrasting accounts. The importance of shaping a narrative that elevates both mothers and fathers in their children's lives cannot be overstated. Public perception plays a significant role in shaping the ecosystem in which fathers operate.

In 2013, California's First 5 Alameda County, Alameda County Public Health Department, and Alameda County Social Services collaborated to establish the Alameda County Fathers Corps. The Corps' mission is to promote and support fathers and father figures to be meaningfully engaged with their children and families. They also advocate for family service providers to provide father-friendly services and to assist fathers in strengthening their parenting skills. Offerings include a learning community that provides:

- Free training to service providers on topics such as fathers' roles in supporting child development, parental rights and responsibilities, and other topics essential to effective father involvement;
- A partnership that builds the capacity of participants to offer father-specific education and support groups; and
- A digital photo bank with downloadable images of "dads being dads." The bank is intended to encourage service providers to include representation of fathers as central to family life in online and print media.

These represent just a few of the ways we can help fathers move outside the "Man Box," a concept introduced by Promundo and Dr. Gary Barker. This phrase reflects the

Ideas to Take Away:

- Support fathers through skills and parenting training that is geared to their needs, like that offered by the Alameda Father Corps, to give fathers the tools and the confidence to be more engaged with their children.
- Leverage existing father-focused networks and resources, such as the Fatherhood Partnership, to accelerate the adoption of programming for fathers.
- Update program or policy narratives to include fathers, from photos and language to giving fathers a seat at the table.
- Address toxic masculinity caused by outdated expectations of what a man should be.

(L to R: Anne Mosle, vice president, the Aspen Institute and executive director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute and Jessica Seinfeld, founder and president, GOOD+ Foundation) © The Aspen Institute: Photo by Laurence Genon

idea that men are supposed to behave a certain way, whether by remaining emotionally distant or opting to go it alone rather than seeking help. Promundo's "Cost of the Man Box" study estimates that the US could save at least $15.7 billion if the "Man Box" did not exist, in large part due to the elimination of pervasive masculine issues like alcoholism, sexual violence, and suicide.

If you spend time with enough families, you will consistently hear one unifying, unwavering theme: Everyone — mothers, fathers, grandparents, guardians, and communities — wants happier and healthier lives for their children. Our goal in shaping public perception should be to amplify that narrative and remove barriers to healthy parental engagement of fathers to help families and communities prosper.

"WE'RE ENTERING A NEW ERA RIGHT NOW FOR FAMILIES AND ABOUT FATHERS, AND THERE'S A POLITICAL WILL GROWING ACROSS OUR COUNTRY SAYING OUR STRUCTURES AND OUR STEREOTYPES ARE BEHIND WHERE FAMILY AND CULTURE IS. IF YOU SPEND TIME TALKING WITH FAMILIES, YOU'RE GOING TO HEAR … ONE UNIFYING, UNWAVERING COMMITMENT: EVERYBODY WANTS IT TO BE BETTER FOR THEIR CHILDREN — MOTHERS, FATHERS, GRANDPARENTS, AND COMMUNITY."

- Anne Mosle, vice president, the Aspen Institute; executive director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

Building a Positive Policy Environment

So many of the services that operate at the state and local levels are based on federally designed programs built on perceptions of families that go back to the early 1900s. In 2003, the federal government started a grant program around healthy marriage and responsible fathering despite a consistent decline in two-parent households in the United States since at least the mid-1900s. While in the early 1960s

babies typically arrived within a marriage, about 40 percent of births today occur to women who are either single or living with a non-marital partner.

In the 1990s, we also built a child support enforcement mechanism based on a misconception that dad had resources and mom did not. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, for example, are typically awarded to the mother, who usually has custody of the children. So while mothers are playing the role of breadwinner — often the primary breadwinner — within their families more than ever, fathers are denied benefits and forced to figure out for themselves how to provide nutrition in developmentally healthy ways in co-parenting relationships. (Pew Research Center, 2015)

But what if we redesigned our systems to think about what children need from their families in order to grow up healthy and thrive as they move into adulthood? What if we also sought to explicitly address racial and gender biases inherent in our public systems to counteract the ways those before us created barriers for such engagement and familial involvement for fathers?

Colorado did exactly that by reforming child support under the leadership of Reggie Bicha, an Ascend Fellow and former executive director of the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). Child support had previously been handled in a retributive way, with those unable to pay being prosecuted. That would leave parents in a worse position than before. After hearing from parents who wanted to provide for their children but did not have the skills or credentials to obtain employment that would allow them to meet their own or their family's needs, CDHS responded to a call for proposals issued by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement to make child support work better for families.

"SO MANY OF THE PROGRAMS THAT WE OPERATE AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS ARE BASED ON FEDERALLY DESIGNED PROGRAMS BUILT ON A PERCEPTION OF FAMILIES THAT LITERALLY GOES BACK TO THE EARLY 1900S. WE NEVER DESIGNED ANY OF THESE SYSTEMS TO THINK ABOUT, 'WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED FROM THEIR FAMILIES IN ORDER TO GROW HEALTHY AND TO BE IN A POSITION TO THRIVE AS THEY MOVE INTO ADULTHOOD? HOW DO WE DESIGN AND OPERATE OUR SYSTEMS AROUND THAT NOTION?'"

- Reggie Bicha, Ascend Fellow

With $2.3 million over five years, Colorado launched the Colorado Parent Employment Program (CO-PEP) to move from a punitive to a supportive approach to child support. This meant offering a portfolio of services to noncustodial parents to help them overcome barriers to employment, stable housing, and self-sufficiency so they would be able to holistically support their children's development. After six months in the program, 66 percent of participants found employment; after one year, 76 percent found jobs. In all, CDHS saw 10-20 percent more revenue from child support payments each month as a result of the reorientation of the child support policy. CDHS continues to assess and learn from the longer-term results of the pilot in order to strengthen its work with noncustodial parents.

(L to R: Raquel Hatter, Ascend Fellow and managing director of human services, Kresge Foundation; Joe Jones, Ascend Fellow and founder and CEO, Center for Urban Families; Kim Dent, executive director, Ohio Commission on Fatherhood; and Reggie Bicha, Ascend Fellow) © The Aspen Institute: Photo by Laurence Genon

In 2017, Colorado became the first state in the US to enact legislation to pass every dollar of child support payment collected by the state directly to families. Prior to this legislation, government agencies used portions of child support payments to administer programs. (Colorado Department of Human Services, 2017) To date, the state has provided an additional roughly $6 million in economic support to children and their families.

At the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood, Executive Director Kim Dent worked with the state Office of Child Support to change the way payments are calculated. Last summer, Governor John Kasich signed into law House Bill 366, which mandates that noncustodial parents with low incomes have self-support reserves set aside to ensure that individuals' basic needs are being met so that they can focus on supporting their children and families. The commission also

Ideas to Take Away:

- Pass child support funds collected by the state directly to the family to increase their economic stability and well-being (Colorado).
- Consider new approaches to working with noncustodial parents that help put them on career pathways so they can re-engage with their children and provide child support (Colorado, Maryland).
- Mandate set-aside "self-support" reserves for noncustodial parents with low incomes so their basic needs are being met and they can focus on supporting their families (Ohio).
- Decrease state-owed child support debt when noncustodial parents participate in relevant programming (Maryland).

worked with the state's Department of Health to change home visiting rules to include fathers.

In Baltimore, Ascend Fellow and GOOD+ grantee partner Joe Jones invited representatives from Maryland's child support office to meet with noncustodial fathers with low incomes at his Center for Urban Families (CFUF). From their dialogue, the state moved to co-design with fathers a model to reduce state-owed child support debt based on participation in CFUF programming focusing on parenting, workforce development, and healthy co-parenting relationships. In 2016, the Maryland legislature enacted House Bill 1502, initiating a three-year pilot program to provide employment assistance to noncustodial parents with active child support cases in Baltimore.

The efforts to effect policy change around father engagement in Colorado, Ohio, and Maryland reflect a commitment to people and outcomes instead of simply compliance. They are critical steps in building a policy environment that empowers fathers to help children and families thrive.

"THE DEPRIVATION ASSOCIATED WITH THESE NONCUSTODIAL DADS, WHO HAPPEN TO HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY IN SOME WAY FOR CHILDREN, MAKES IT IMPERATIVE THAT WE THINK ABOUT DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT."

- Joe Jones, founder, president, and CEO, Center for Urban Families

Fatherhood in the Earliest Years

The importance of the earliest years of a child's life to healthy development is well documented. In the first few years of life, children make millions of new neural connections per second, building the foundation upon which later, more complex development can build. We see differences in children's vocabularies as early as 18 months of age, and exposure to adverse childhood experiences in the first three years significantly increases the odds of developmental delays and health complications into adulthood. (Harvard Center on the Developing Child) Recent research supports a core tenet of the two-generation approach that children's healthy development is largely

"HISTORICALLY, THE APPROACH TO ENGAGING FAMILIES HAS BEEN TO ENGAGE MOTHERS.... MANY HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS, HOME VISITORS, AND INDIVIDUALS WHO WORK WITHIN CITY AND STATE AGENCIES ARE TRAINED TO THINK ABOUT THE WAYS THEY ENGAGE WITH MOTHERS. SO [TO ENGAGE FATHERS MORE MEANINGFULLY] REQUIRES CAPACITY BUILDING ON THE PART OF THOSE SYSTEMS TO GET STAFF WORKING WITH FAMILIES TO THINK ABOUT HOW THEY NEED TO CHANGE THEIR APPROACHES TO BE MORE FATHER CENTRIC INSTEAD OF JUST MATERNAL CENTRIC."

- Darius Tandon, associate professor of medical social sciences, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine

dependent on their caregiver's overall health. Children whose parents are in "very good" or "excellent" health are almost four times more likely to be in "very good" or "excellent" health than children whose parents' health is less than optimal. (ChildTrends, 2019)

With this knowledge, Darius Tandon, Ascend Fellow and co-director of Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine's Center for Community Health, has worked with home visiting programs for the last five years to promote healthy mood management and self-efficacy by teaching participants how to effectively respond to stress. Tandon initially developed this intervention for mothers and is now piloting a similar intervention for fathers. The new Fathers and Babies curriculum is designed to be delivered in concert with the Mothers and Babies curriculum through home visiting programs. After an initial in-person visit with a family, home visiting program staff offer assistance to mothers on-site and provide complementary information to fathers via text message to simultaneously promote healthy mood management, parent-child bonding, and strategies for coping with stress.

GOOD+ grantee and Ascend Network Partner Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) is a home visiting program that is also redefining itself and its services to include fathers and other male caregivers. NFP's model is to have trained nurses visit young, first-time mothers on a regular basis from pregnancy until a child's second birthday. Recognizing that creating better futures for mothers and their young children requires solidifying whole families, NFP nurses now work with male caregivers as well. During home visits, they focus on

Ideas to Take Away:

- Ensure home visiting programs engage fathers too as Fathers & Babies and Nurse-Family Partnership are beginning to do.
- Raise awareness among health and social service staff about the importance of engaging fathers to ensure healthy children and families.

helping fathers be available, able contributors to children's healthy development and families' overall well-being alongside mothers.

Breadwinners and Caregivers

We all know that raising a child is expensive. The latest US Department of Agriculture report on expenditures on children by families from birth through age 17 found that annual child-rearing expenses for a child in a family with a low income range from $9,330 to $9,980 depending on the age of the child. (USDA, 2017) To genuinely work toward family stability, we need to support all caregivers and contributors to family success in achieving economic security and educational success. That includes recognizing fathers as co-contributors to children's healthy development.

Ascend Network Partner Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana offers a variety of job-seeking and placement services to help connect individuals with barriers to employment. Recognizing that almost half a million working-age Indiana residents lack a high school diploma, Goodwill opened the Excel Center, a free public high school for adults who want to earn a high school diploma. The center offers flexible schedules, opportunities to earn college credits, a variety of industry-recognized certifications, on-site child care, and more to help adults earn diplomas and take steps toward careers or postsecondary opportunities. Importantly, the organization also invests in coaches who support students throughout their studies and Goodwill Guides to provide wraparound support and career guidance.

For unemployed and underemployed fathers ages 18-30 in New York City, the City University of New York's (CUNY) Fatherhood Academy — a GOOD+ grantee partner — promotes responsible parenting and economic stability through education, employment, and personal development. The program provides a range of academic and personal supports, including high school equivalency test preparation courses, tutoring, individualized counseling, parenting seminars, and job preparation. CUNY Fatherhood Academy's mission is to help young fathers prepare for, enroll in, and matriculate through college with the understanding that earning a postsecondary credential is the most effective path toward long-term economic sustainability for them and their families.

At STRIVE International, programs are designed to lead clients through training, case management, and other supportive

Ideas to Take Away:

- Invest in programs like the Excel Center that provide adult high school education instead of just GED attainment, so fathers and mothers have the opportunity to actively re-engage in education and career pathways.
- Support fathers through programs like STRIVE and CUNY Fatherhood Academy that offer the wraparound coaching and other tools they need to navigate postsecondary and career opportunities along with family responsibilities.

(Darius Tandon, Ascend Fellow and associate professor of medical social sciences, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine) © The Aspen Institute: Photo by Laurence Genon

services into a job. STRIVE's program begins with a 10- to 12-week job-readiness workshop where individuals receive attitudinal training, professional skill building, and work-readiness training. After completing this primary phase of training, participants progress into more targeted occupational skills training where they earn industry-recognized credentials. A GOOD+ grantee partner, STRIVE understands the interconnectedness of parent and children's health and holistic well-being. Participants in STRIVE's career pathways program gain access to a targeted fatherhood program and receive intensive case management to help them navigate child care, health care, and housing needs that so often act as obstacles to employment.

Programs like the Excel Center, CUNY Fatherhood Academy, and STRIVE International are modeling how to serve fathers more intentionally and families more holistically. They each shared their expertise and insights at the Father Factor convening. We must continue to highlight examples like these and other promising practices to help fathers build stability for their families.

Building Opportunity for Re-Entering Dads

A conversation about father engagement, especially in underserved communities, cannot be separated from a conversation about building opportunity for re-entering offenders. Far too many families and communities are damaged by the criminal justice system in America. Field leaders are working to understand and build opportunities for individuals to overcome the unique challenges fathers face with their families as they re-enter our communities.

Serving more than 6,500 individuals in 22 cities in eight states across the US, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) offers re-entering offenders ongoing support to build career capital and financial stability. The CEO model offers job-readiness training to prepare people for success in the workplace,

Ideas to Take Away:

- Recognize the powerful positive influence children have on their parents and invest in re-entry programs for fathers and mothers, like CEO, that leverage parenting roles to increase the effectiveness of job training and access to public benefits and retention services.
- Include activities that focus on parenting and healthy relationships in re-entry programs, such as those offered by Dad's Back! Academy.

transitional employment to provide immediate paid work experience, job coaching and placement to connect talented employees with quality employers, and retention services to ensure participants' success beyond placement. CEO's theory of change posits that if the employment needs of those who have recently returned home from incarceration are met through life skills education, short-term paid transitional employment, full-time job placement, and post-placement services, they will be less likely to reoffend and more likely to build stable, productive lives for themselves and their families.

In Los Angeles County, California, GOOD+ grantee partner Dads Back! Academy at Friends Outside in Los Angeles County provides activities focused on responsible parenting, healthy relationships, skills building, economic stability, and job preparation for re-entering fathers. The academy is organized into three phases designed to immerse participants in a supportive environment of services, implement programming to meet individual fathers' needs, and place fathers on paths to independence, improved parental relationships, and gainful employment.

Conclusion

To be sure, an intentional focus on fathers is a focus on families. Critical to this work is the understanding that an emphasis on father engagement supports mothers who have and will continue to anchor so many aspects of American family life. But active fathers do help build stronger, more resilient families, which are the backbone of thriving communities and a strong country. As Ascend, GOOD+, and organizations working on behalf of families across the country continue to move this work forward, we must remain diligent about reshaping narratives to elevate the importance of mothers and fathers, reimagining public policy and systems to work for 21st-century families, ensuring that adult education and workforce pathways are adapting to serve fathers and families more holistically, and building bridges to connect justice-involved families to opportunity as they re-enter our communities. As we work to move children and their families together toward economic stability, educational success, and health and well-being, it is imperative that we intervene on behalf of two parents for one future.

This brief is part of a body of work throughout 2019 and beyond that elevates father-supportive innovation in programs and policies to reimagine public systems and community services for 21st-century families.

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The Aspen Institute is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, DC. Its mission is to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues. The Institute has campuses in Aspen, Colorado, and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It also maintains offices in New York City and has an international network of partners.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute is the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success, economic security, and health and well-being. We embrace a commitment to racial equity and a gender lens.

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Founded by Jessica Seinfeld, GOOD+ Foundation (formerly Baby Buggy) is a leading national nonprofit that works to dismantle multi-generational poverty by pairing tangible goods with innovative services for low-income fathers, mothers, and caregivers, creating an upward trajectory for the whole family. GOOD+ Foundation grants donations of products and services to programs that have demonstrated a capacity to address family poverty in three focus areas: supporting new mothers, investing in early childhood, and engaging fathers. Through the generous support of donors and more than 56,000 volunteers, GOOD+ has donated nearly 20 million items through its partner network across the United States. The organization has achieved a 4-star rating on Charity Navigator and received national accreditation from the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance for its efficient fundraising and operations.

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