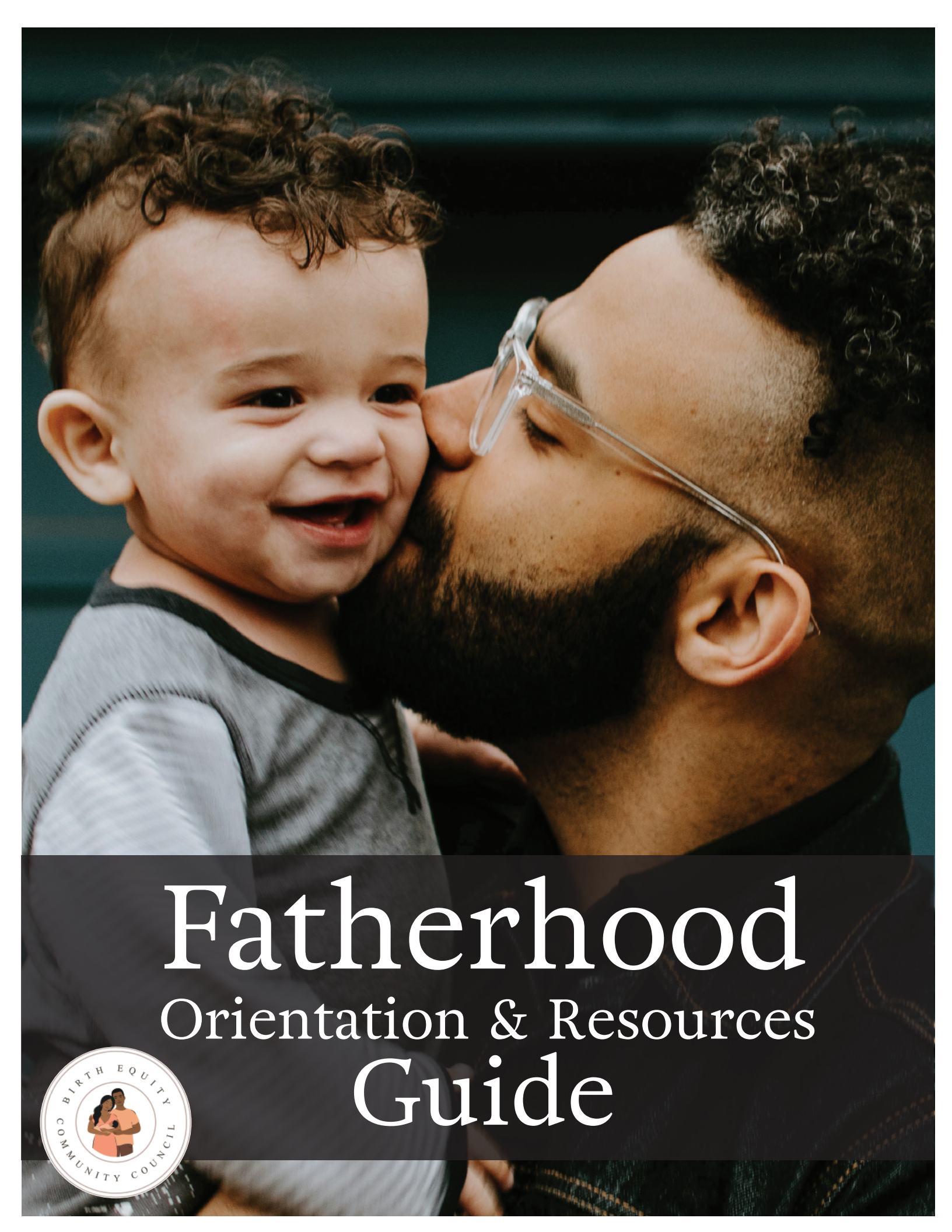




Fatherhood Orientation & Resources Guide



Dear Fathers,

As a group of dedicated fathers and community advocates, we want you to know that you are not alone as you jump into your role as a father. We are here as a result of our fathers and father figures molding us into the people we are today. We believe all men should have an ally in their fatherhood journey. During your journey through fatherhood, we will be there to walk alongside you in this fathers' space with purpose and persistence. Never feel alone because we have your back.

Fatherhood and the presence of fathers is critical to the success of the next generation. Your role and its impact are critical—you must be insistent and persistent to make sure you have the concrete supports, reliable resources, and community needed to support your families and continue being active in your child's life.

Fathers have the power to help their children grow up healthy, happy, and with the ability to develop meaningful relationships with others. We want you to know that fathers are more than disciplinarians and a source of income to care for our children. Although these are necessary components of being a parent, this is not the sum of our parts. The resources we've included in this Father's Orientation and Resource Guide will give fathers a chance to engage, educate themselves, and exhaust every resource needed to advocate and support the health and wellbeing of your children, family, and yourself.

In Support of Your Fatherhood Journey,

Thomas Chatman Jr.

Charles Dixon

William Moore

Clarence Jones



Centering Fathers Action Group Leaders
Birth Equity Community Council (BECC)

Fatherhood Guide

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Centering Fatherhood

The Power of Fatherhood

Fatherhood is more than a title - it's a powerful and transformative presence in a child's life. Research consistently shows that when fathers are actively involved in positive and encouraging ways, children benefit in nearly every area of development. From higher academic achievement to stronger self-esteem and healthier emotional regulation, a father's nurturing engagement makes a lasting impact.

Fathers support their children in vital ways:

- ✓ **Emotionally**, by providing love, encouragement, and stability;
- ✓ **Physically**, through care and protection; and
- ✓ **Economically**, by contributing to their household's financial foundation.

Children thrive when fathers lead with empathy, guidance, and respect, creating an environment where they feel safe, seen, and valued.

When fathers are actively involved, it strengthens families, *regardless of the relationship between parents*. This presence becomes a generational offering: a chance to pass on the care and legacy of your own father's impact, or to be the support you may have longed for but never received. It's deeply relational - what children remember most is how they were made to feel. Choosing to show up with love, patience, and consistency can transform not just your child's life, but your own.

Reflect & Act

Envision your role as a father & ask yourself:

- What do I want to duplicate from my own relationship and experience with my father?
- What might I want to change?
- What resources and connections do I need to secure my role and relationship with my child and the parent of my child?

Challenging the Historical Narratives: Reclaiming Fatherhood in Birth and Parenting

For generations, dominant narratives have sidelined the roles of fathers, especially those who identify as Black, Brown, and American Indian fathers, in birth, caregiving, and parenting. Too often, these narratives cast fathers as absent or secondary, erasing the deep history of men who have nurtured, protected, and guided their families from the very beginning.

It's time to interrupt that story and rewrite the script.

Fathers have always been important. Across cultures, men have held space in birthing ceremonies, offered care in the postpartum period, and carried the responsibility of raising future generations. Reclaiming fatherhood means remembering that being a father is not just about provision - it's about presence, tenderness, and guidance.

To challenge the historical narrative, we must first name the systems that have distorted it: incarceration, exclusion from reproductive spaces, economic injustice, and racist portrayals of Black and Brown fatherhood. These systems have worked to disconnect fathers from their families - and from themselves.

The Importance of Understanding: Knowledge Strengthens Fatherhood

Being an engaged father doesn't mean being perfect - it's about being present, learning, supporting, and growing into your role alongside your child and their other parents. Whether you are co-parenting, living together, or supporting from afar, your role matters deeply.

Too often, fathers are left out of parenting systems that assume they're secondary. But when fathers are equipped with knowledge, they challenge those assumptions and lead with clarity and care - from the birthing room onward.

Fatherhood is an ongoing journey - an opportunity to learn with your children, discover who they are becoming, and uncover who you are becoming in the process. Whether you're advocating at a doctor's visit, co-parenting with integrity, or simply reading with your child in the park, you're embodying that fatherhood is powerful, nurturing, and steeped in leadership.

Reclaim fatherhood on your own terms, and raise your children supportively, in a world you've helped to reshape.



The Key Components of Fatherhood

Support During Pregnancy, Labor & Postpartum

Be a steady presence. Ask how you can be involved and support your partner during pregnancy. Attend prenatal appointments, ask questions, and learn about the birthing process. Your calm presence and willingness to learn helps build trust and shared responsibility.

Be an advocate. Speak up when your partner needs support or rest, and help navigate systems like hospitals and providers so your partner can focus on birthing.



Scan for the
Birthing
Bill of Rights

Be emotionally available. Offer reassurance, encouragement, and presence without needing to fix everything. Sit beside them, hold their hand, and remind them they're not alone.

Be open to learning. You won't have all the answers, and that's okay. Learn from your partner, from providers, and from your baby. Stay curious and committed to growing in your role.

Be prepared for labor but know you're not the priority. Pack snacks, water, and phone chargers for yourself, but remember: you're there to support the birthing person. Dress in layers, wear comfortable shoes, and be ready to stay flexible and responsive.

Be the backup and the buffer. Talk, sing, and cuddle with your baby. Skin-to-skin contact builds connection and trust - for both of you. Manage visitors, communicate boundaries, and protect your partner's rest and recovery space. Be the one who says "no" to protect mom's and your rest, energy, and bonding time when needed.

Be hands-on postpartum. During this period of transition and preparation, you'll find yourself balancing a busy schedule of appointments, classes, celebrations, and fixing your home up for a new baby. The pressure to feel happy all the time is unrealistic, studies have found that fathers can develop depression during their partner's pregnancy and after they give birth. Nobody is immune to the stress that comes with welcoming a new child. Learning about your mental health and ways to support your wellbeing is key to being a supportive partner during the birthing process. Change diapers, do feedings, hold the baby, soothe cries. Support your partner's recovery and mental health.

Be a team player. Share responsibilities without waiting to be asked. From laundry to soothing baby at night—your active presence matters every day.





SERVE AND RETURN



Scan for Examples
of Serve + Return

The Critical First 3 Years: Bonding Shapes the Brain

The early years (0-3) are the most powerful time to shape your child's development through love, consistency, and trust. Science shows that **your relationship during these years, forms the foundation of your child's brain development.**

Attachment begins with "serve and return."

When your baby cries, reaches out, or babbles - they're **serv**ing. How you respond is your **ret**urn, and it builds trust.

Example: Infant – During Diaper Change

Baby's serve:

Baby kicks legs and makes a "goo" sound while looking up.



Father's return:

Dad leans in with a smile and says, "Hi there! You're ready to roll, aren't you?" while gently holding baby's feet.



Exchange:

Baby wiggles again and coos louder. Dad continues: "Ohhh, you've got strong legs! Let's get you cleaned up fast, champ."

 **What's happening:** Baby initiates with sound and movement; Dad responds with voice and attention, building connection and communication.

Encouraging, tuned-in responses help develop:

- A sense of safety and trust
- Self-esteem and emotional regulation
- The child's understanding of how relationships work
- Cognitive and language development

When adults don't "return", it can lead to your child to have feelings of mistrust and insecurity when their needs go unmet. When a child experiences neglect or abuse and doesn't form a secure attachment with a parent, it can disrupt brain development and emotional growth. This can lead to difficulty with trust, regulation, learning, and relationships - but with consistent, nurturing care, healing is possible.

Reflect & Act

Practice Serve and Return with your child:

- **Talk about** what your child is doing: Narrate feeding time, or playtime ("You're reaching for the toy! Let's get it together!")
- **Imitate their sounds:** If your baby says "ba-ba," try saying it back with joy. This tells them they've been heard.
- **Read and engage:** When reading together, pause to let your baby touch the pages or babble - respond to their gestures like a conversation.

Learning to Father

Understanding parenting, health systems, and legal rights can strengthen your confidence as a father. Whether through programs, reading, or local groups, becoming informed helps you advocate for your child and your co-parent, making your role invaluable.



Parenting Remotely: Staying Connected Across Distance

Parenting remotely as a father who doesn't live full-time with your child can be challenging, but it's still possible to build strong, loving bonds and remain an active presence in your child's life. Phone calls, video chats, letters, and virtual activities like reading together or helping with homework online are powerful ways to stay involved. **When negotiating custody and parenting time, it's important to advocate for consistent communication and meaningful remote engagement as part of your parenting plan.** Courts increasingly recognize the importance of virtual parenting time, especially when distance or life circumstances make daily in-person contact difficult. Showing up from afar *consistently and with intention* - matters deeply.

Reclaiming Your Relationship: Healing After Harm

If you've caused harm to your child or their birthing parent, you're not alone - and healing is possible. Whether you're co-parenting or parenting from jail, there are steps you can take to rebuild or build trust and restore connection.

One powerful framework that can help is the **Circle of Security**, which reminds us that "good enough" parenting is not only acceptable - it's the goal. **We don't have to be perfect to show up with care, consistency, and love.** What matters most is the effort to understand, support, and remain emotionally available to our children, even through difficult circumstances.

If you're parenting while incarcerated, there are resources in Minnesota jails that can support your fathering journey and strengthen your parenting skills. *Consider exploring the mental health and parenting support programs listed on the last page of this guide.*

"When I got out, I had no idea how to be a dad. But I started small, FaceTiming every day, asking how school was. Now my daughter knows I'm here. She tells me she feels safe when we talk. That means everything."

– Malik, MN father

Mental Health, Wellness & Fitness

Paying Attention to Your Own Emotional, Spiritual and Cognitive Health

Mental Health is an umbrella term for your general sense of emotional, psychological, and cognitive wellbeing. Everybody has mental health that changes every day, but we usually ignore it until something goes seriously wrong. The best way to prepare for unexpected instances of heightened emotion, like grief or anger, is to start paying attention to your mental health before something goes wrong.

The language around mental health is always changing, but the following terms can help you talk about how you're feeling to help you plan for the ebb and flow of life and its impacts on your mental health, wellbeing, and fitness:

- **Mental Wellbeing** describes as the state of your emotional and cognitive wellbeing and is supported by a sense of connection, stability, meaning in one's life, and sense of belonging.
- **Mental Fitness** is the purposeful practice of taking care of your mental health & wellbeing. It's important during times of illness, stress, and prosperity.
- **Mental Illness** is a clinical term that describes a specific condition or diagnosis that impacts your mood, thinking, and actions so that it's difficult to feel emotional and cognitively well.

Ways to engage in Mental Fitness:

- Sleep
- Eat nutritious food
- Participate in physical exercise
- Create connections with other fathers and parents
- Set time aside of mindfulness or meaningful downtime
- Engage in spiritual practice, however that looks for you
- Check out more mental health resources around parenting, crisis services, coping skills, grief support, and more.



For more information, please visit the Mental Health Coalition's Website





Father's Rights, Responsibilities & Choices

Fatherhood begins long before a child can say "Dad." From the moment of birth, and even before, fathers have both rights and responsibilities that shape the wellbeing of their families. Yet too often, fathers are left out of systems that should recognize and support them. Knowledge, advocacy, and support can equip fathers with the tools they need to show up - legally, emotionally, and practically.

Recognition of Parentage What It Means and Why It Matters for Legal Standing

"Paternity" is a legal term used to refer to people who have become the legal father of a child, under Minnesota law. Once paternity is established, fathers have the right to ask for a court order for custody and parenting time and the legal obligation to financially support their child. Without establishing paternity, even an involved father may not have a say in key decisions or custody rights.

The Recognition of Parentage (ROP) affirms a father's role and rights in their child's life. It establishes the legal bond between father and child and is essential for making decisions about the child's health, education, and well-being. Signing a Recognition of Parentage (ROP) form gives a father legal standing as the child's parent, but does not automatically mean he has the right to custody, parenting time rights or child support obligations - *you still need to order a court order to get custody, parenting time, or support.*

For parents who are not married at the time of their child's birth, biological fathers are not automatically recognized as the legal father until paternity is established - even if their name is on the birth certificate. In the state of Minnesota, biological fathers have no legal rights to their child and no responsibility to support the child financially until paternity is established.

Without formal legal recognition and established paternity - through the Recognition or Parentage (ROP), Acknowledgment of Paternity (AOP), or a court order - fathers may face barriers to custody, visitation, or even being listed on the birth certificate. Early recognition ensures that fathers are seen, respected, and protected in their parenting role from the very beginning.



Scan for
Recognition
of Parentage
in Minnesota

You can find more information about the Recognition of Parentage in Minnesota here;
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/vitalrecords/rop.html>.

✓ Access to Legal Counsel

How to Navigate Court Proceedings, Custody, and Parental Rights

Navigating the legal system can be overwhelming, especially when it comes to custody, visitation, and parental rights. Having access to legal counsel empowers fathers to understand your rights, advocate for your relationship with your child, and avoid costly missteps in family court. Whether dealing with a custody arrangement, establishing paternity, or responding to court orders, legal guidance helps fathers make informed decisions and ensures that your voice is heard.

When seeking legal counsel for establishing parenting time and custody, it's **important to come prepared** with key information about your role in your child's life. This includes documenting your involvement in caregiving, your current and preferred custody arrangement, and the amount of time you've consistently spent with your child. Be ready to share how you support your child's day-to-day needs, from school and medical care to emotional well-being. Understanding the difference between legal custody (decision-making) and physical custody (where the child lives) can also help you clearly communicate your goals.

Equally important is your relationship with the other parent and any relevant history that may affect co-parenting - such as communication patterns, past conflict, or concerns about safety. A lawyer will also need to understand your living situation, sources of income, support systems, and your ability to meet the child's needs. Bringing any court documents, written agreements, or parenting schedules you've followed in the past can help build a strong foundation for your case. **Above all, be ready to discuss how the proposed arrangement supports the best interests and stability of your child.**



Scan for
Legal Counsel
Resources

You can search for legal services through LawHelpMN; <https://www.lawhelpmn.org/>





✓ Child Support

Strategies for Advocacy and Fair Treatment

The child support system exists to ensure that children are financially supported - but it must also be **fair and equitable**. Fathers have the right to request a review of their payment obligations if their income changes, to pursue shared custody arrangements that reflect their role, and to seek support services that prevent punitive enforcement. Advocacy and legal guidance can help fathers navigate the system in ways that uphold their rights and strengthen their connection to their children.

Engaging with the child support system is an important step toward ensuring fairness, accountability, and access to support. Tools like **income-based payment plans, mediation services, and holistic family programs** are designed to help fathers remain active in their children's lives while meeting financial responsibilities in realistic, sustainable ways.

Being involved in child support not only helps ensure that children's needs are met - it also reinforces a father's role as a consistent and contributing presence. Active participation in the **process can protect a father's rights**, build trust with co-parents and courts, and provide a clearer path to long-term stability and involvement in their child's life.



Scan for
Child Support
Resources

Find your local child support office through the Minnesota Department of Children Youth and Families; <https://dcyf.mn.gov/individuals-and-families/family-services/child-support>

✓ Public Supports

Whether it's accessing housing, healthcare, or public benefits, systems can overlook or exclude fathers - treating them as invisible in family support structures. But when fathers engage with these services, advocating not just for their children, but also for themselves, they gain more than support: they reclaim their role in the family. **This active engagement helps shift outdated narratives and opens the door to more equitable treatment across institutions.** In doing so, fathers report improved health, greater life satisfaction, a stronger sense of belonging, and a renewed sense of purpose in their role as caregivers, protectors, and leaders in their children's lives.



Family Home Visiting

Nonjudgemental Parenting Guidance

Family home visiting programs offer personalized, in-home support to help parents navigate the early years of a child's life - and fathers benefit just as much from this resource as mothers do. These visits provide practical guidance on **child development, parenting strategies, and feel more confident navigating services**, all within a familiar and supportive setting. Home visitors help fathers feel seen and respected, offering space to ask questions, gain confidence, and build meaningful connections with their children in a **nonjudgmental environment**.

When fathers are included in home visiting services, it validates their role in the family and can lead to stronger co-parenting relationships and healthier home environments. Fathers who participate are often better prepared to support their child's emotional and developmental needs, advocate within healthcare and school systems, and contribute to long-term family stability. It's a powerful way to support fatherhood from the ground up - **building knowledge, confidence, and connection right in the heart of the home.**



You can find a family home visiting program near you using the Family Home Visiting Coalition's Directory

<https://www.mnfamilyhomevisiting.org/>

Never Too Late to Be a Father

It's never too late to be part of your child's life. Rebuilding trust takes time, honesty, and consistency, but every step matters. Whether you're reconnecting after distance, incarceration, or personal struggles, showing up now can still shape your child's sense of love, safety, and belonging. **What matters most is your willingness to try, to listen, and to keep showing up with genuine curiosity and care.**

On Rights & Responsibilities as a Father

Taking responsibility means engaging systems that weren't always built for you and transforming them through your earnest presence and measured persistence. And in doing so, fathers not only uplift their children, but grow into fuller versions of themselves: grounded in purpose, strengthened by knowledge, and connected by love.

You matter. You belong. And you have both the power and the responsibility to show up fully - for your children, your family, and yourself.

Understanding Your Role as a Parent

Effective Communication & Advocacy

Being involved starts with showing up and staying connected. That means listening with care, asking thoughtful questions, and keeping your child's best interest at the center. Whether you live with your child or co-parent, small, consistent actions - like attending appointments, reading together, or showing up at school events - help build strong, trusting relationships.

The Language of Advocacy: Speaking Up for Your Child

When talking to doctors, teachers, or legal staff, how you speak can make a difference. Use clear, respectful language that centers your child's needs:

- "I'd like to understand more about what this means for my child."
- "Can you explain that in simpler terms?"
- "I want to be involved—what are the next steps?"
- "How can we work together to support my child's progress?"
- "I've noticed some changes at home. Can we talk about what that might mean in class?"

These phrases show care, invite collaboration, and help you stay informed and engaged.

Tracking & Documenting Conversations: Protecting Your Rights

Keep a simple record of important conversations with providers, teachers, or case workers. Note dates, names, and what was discussed or decided. Saving texts, emails, or writing things down can help you follow up and protect your role as a parent. Documentation is a powerful tool that shows your commitment - and builds a clear history of your involvement.



I want to be involved,
what are the
next steps?

Can you explain
that in simpler
terms?

What documentation
do I need to keep or
submit to stay in
good standing?

What support plans
or accommodations
are available if my
child is struggling?

What can I do
to help support
(my child)?

I'd like to understand
more about what this
means for my child.

What are the side
effects or long-term
impacts of this
medication/treatment?

What do I say?



Resources & Next Steps

Take Advantage of Community Resources Available to You

Fatherhood doesn't come with a manual, but you're not in it alone. Whether you're just starting out or facing challenges along the way, **there are steps you can take today to stay informed, connected, and actively involved in your child's life.** Start by reaching out to your local human services office or exploring statewide fatherhood initiatives. Across the state, there are organizations and networks dedicated to supporting fathers with parenting classes, legal guidance, job support, and peer connection. No matter where you are on your journey, you don't have to walk it alone. Look for:

- **Ramsey County Club Dad:** <https://www.ramseycounty.us/residents/health-medical/clinics-services/family-health-home-visiting-programs>
- **Wilder Foundation's African American Babies Coalition & Projects:** <https://aabcprojects.org/index.html>
- **Healthy Black Pregnancies:** <https://www.healthyblackpregnancies.org/>
- **Ujamaa Place:** <https://ujamaaplace.org/enroll-today/>
- **Twin Cities Dads:** <https://tcdads.org/>
- **Hue-MAN Partnership:** <https://www.huemanpartnershipalliance.org/>

Practical Steps for Advocacy

- ✓ **Stay informed.** Attend your child's appointments, ask questions, and keep records.
- ✓ **Show up consistently.** Even small moments like reading a book, attending school meetings - build trust and presence.
- ✓ **Build your team.** Connect with teachers, doctors, and community support to stay in the loop and advocate with confidence.
- ✓ Advocacy means **being your child's steady support** at home and in systems.

For more information contact Thomas TC Chatman at Thomas.chatmanjr@co.ramsey.mn.us, or visit the Birth Equity Community Council Facebook page; <https://www.facebook.com/birthequitycommunitycouncil/>

This father's resource guide was developed in partnership with Saint Paul - Ramsey County Public Health and LaCroix-Dalluhn Consulting.


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