

Engaging Fathers in Maternal & Infant Health Programs

Importance – Challenges – Strategies

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- What do we mean by ‘*engaging fathers*’?
- Why engage fathers?
- What are challenges to engaging fathers?
- How do programs engage fathers?
- What can home visitors/community health workers do to encourage father engagement?

What do we mean by 'Father Engagement' ?

Engaging male partners,
fathers, father -figures in:

- maternal and infant health in general
- maternal and infant health program activities

Why engage fathers in MIH?

Studies have shown that fathers are important not just for child development but also play a role in preconception, conception, pregnancy, birth/ delivery, post -delivery, and early infancy.



Fathers' Role: Before & in between pregnancies

- Family planning / reproductive life planning
- Contraception use



- Can help reduce unintended pregnancies
- Can help increase use of birth control
- Can help reduce risk of sexually transmitted diseases for mothers

Fathers' Role: Before & in between pregnancies

- Father's physical health
- Father's preconception risk behaviors

- Use of alcohol
- Smoking (cigarettes, marijuana)
- Diet
- Environmental exposures

Impact genes passed on
to infant through sperm

Fathers' Role: During Pregnancy

● Affect maternal stress & well-being

- Cause stress (domestic violence, no financial support, not recognizing or wanting the pregnancy)

Or

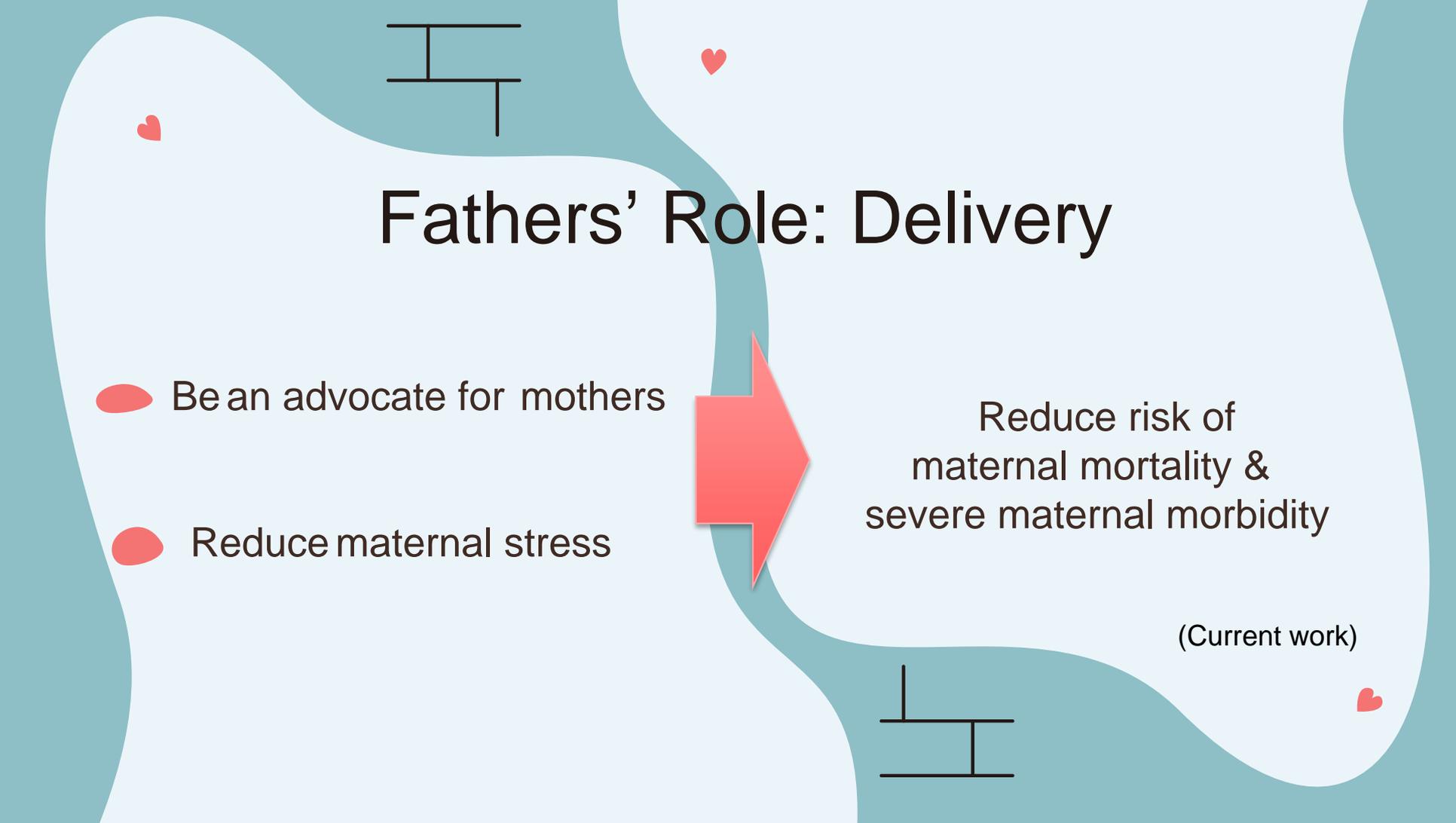
- Reduce stress (emotional and physical support & encouragement, financial support)

● Affect maternal behaviors

- Encourage maternal positive behaviors (eating right, exercising, not smoking, going to prenatal care appointments)



- Fetal growth
- Preterm birth
- Infant birth weight



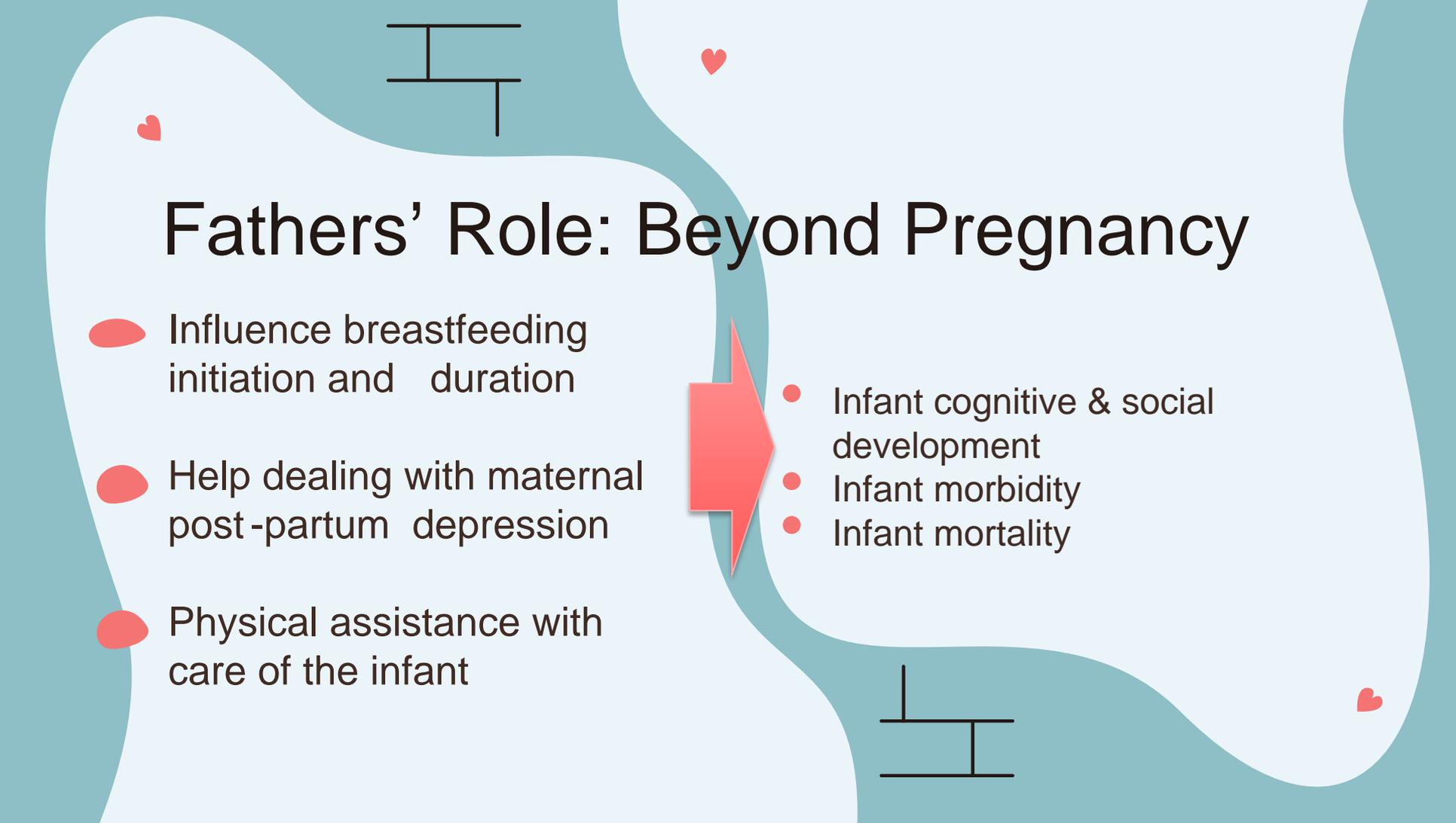
Fathers' Role: Delivery

- Be an advocate for mothers
- Reduce maternal stress



Reduce risk of
maternal mortality &
severe maternal morbidity

(Current work)



Fathers' Role: Beyond Pregnancy

- Influence breastfeeding initiation and duration
- Help dealing with maternal post-partum depression
- Physical assistance with care of the infant



- Infant cognitive & social development
- Infant morbidity
- Infant mortality

♥ When fathers are not engaged: ♥

- Birth outcomes are poorer
- Infant mortality rates are higher
- Racial disparities are wider
- There is increased risk of maternal depression
- Reduced cognitive and social development



Involving Fathers in MIH Programs

Challenges & Barriers to Engaging Fathers

Socio-economic issues
(lack of employment,
incarceration, multiple
child support
responsibilities)

Sense of
inadequacy as
father

Our society sees
women as having the
primary responsibility
for reproductive health
and caring for infants

Geographic location
(e.g., does not reside
locally)

Challenges & Barriers to Engaging Fathers

- Relationship with the mother
 - mom is often the gate-keeper



Challenges & Barriers to Engaging Fathers

Institutions providing MIH services are focused on women & fathers are not expected to be involved in preconception, prenatal, postnatal or inter-conception care.

Lack of funding dedicated to father engagement in MIH

Policies and laws reflect the tendency to focus on mother and child, rather than the family as a whole, and do not favor men:

- Laws regarding paternity and assistance to families
- Paternity leave

Challenges & Barriers to Engaging Fathers

Staff/community/individual perceptions of fatherhood and fathers of various cultural, racial, educational, and economic groups.

The assumption that fathers from certain groups are “*deadbeat Dads*” or “*don’t care about their children*” or “*are simply interested in making children but not raising them*” and so on.



It is important to approach father engagement without holding to stereotypes and myths that assume the worst of fathers.

- Fathers care about their children
- Fathers want to be involved but may not know how
- Fathers not being involved in their children's lives is often due to feelings of inadequacies (no job/money, no experience being a father, don't know what a good father is supposed to be like, no role models, etc.)



**Promising
strategies for
engaging fathers in
maternal & infant
health programs**

To Engage Fathers:

1. *Define the father group to engage*
2. *Prepare the environment*
3. *Select outreach strategies*
4. *Tailor the message*
5. *Develop or identify activities or program*
6. *Identify partners and community resources for fathers/men*
7. *Assess program progress*

1 *Define the fathers you wish to engage:*

Who does your program wish to engage?

- ✓ fathers of the infants served?
- ✓ partners of the mothers served?
- ✓ fathers in the community in general?
- ✓ adolescent fathers?
- ✓ incarcerated fathers?
- ✓ biological fathers of father-figures?
- ✓ other population of fathers?



1



2

Prepare the environment:



Is the environment welcoming of fathers?

- ✓ showing images of nurturing fathers with their infants in the office of waiting area
- ✓ adding magazines in the waiting room that would generally be of interest to men,
- ✓ have pamphlets about issues fathers may face,
- ✓ include images of fathers on program materials,
- ✓ have a diaper changing station in the men's restroom

1



2

Prepare the environment: (cont')



Is the environment welcoming of fathers?

- ✓ Is the staff experienced or trained?
 - ✓ staff welcoming of fathers?
 - ✓ Staff suspicious of fathers' presence?
 - ✓ Staff reluctant to address fathers?

→ Hiring the right staff and/or providing training for existing staff is needed as we include fathers in programs for mothers and infants.



2

Prepare the environment: (cont') POLL ❤️

1. Does the entire staff have an understanding of the role men play in children's lives? Do fathers believe there is value to using the program?
2. Is there a male on staff that fathers are able to connect with?
3. Is there a male volunteer or representative (another father) who is the point man for fathering activities?
4. If there is no male on staff, are the women trained to work specifically with men?
5. Is the physical environment welcoming to fathers?
6. What biases may be influencing your efforts to engage men?
7. Are there resources available that speak to fathers?
8. Do promotion materials reflect fathers in the wording and images?
9. Have you identified local partners and resources for men?



2

Prepare the environment: (cont') Training Staff



- Recruit staff with experience and/or training in working with fathers/men:
- Match staff to population as much as possible based on gender, age, background, personality,
- All staff should be trained on working with fathers/men – even if there is a dedicated male coordinator
- Health practitioners/providers should be made aware of importance of fathers/men/partners and the MIH program's intention to engage fathers/men/partners.

1



2

Prepare the environment: (cont')

Home Visitors/Community Health Workers

- Understand the importance of fathers/partners/men's involvement
- Engage fathers during home visits
 - Respect the role of fathers
 - Value the role of fathers
 - Share with mothers and fathers/partners the importance of fathers' role in maternal and infant health
 - Include fathers in home visits when possible or provide information on reproductive health when possible



1



2

Prepare the environment: (cont')

Examples of positive conversations with fathers about their children during home visits:

- What has your infant/child taught you?
- When did something really special happen between the two of you?
- What have you changed about yourself because of your infant/child?
- What have you done to make things better for your infant/child?
- What strategies help you and your partner raise your infant/child together? Or on your own?
- What would your partner say is your unique contribution to the family?
- When things look rough, what keeps you going?



1



3

Select outreach strategies:



- Where and how can you reach your target population of men or fathers?
 - Important to target fathers specifically (not the family in general)
 - Use the word “father” when reaching out (not “parent” which is usually viewed as the mother)
 - For teen parents use the term: “young fathers”
 - Use a father friendly hook (e.g., sports theme)
- “Invite Dad” Strategy → includes direct communication with fathers about the program; Involves the mother to encourage fathers to participate

1



4

Tailor the message:



- Are your messages and incentives for participation tailored to men/fathers?
- “Invite Dad” messaging strategy includes:
 - explaining to fathers why it is important for them to be involved in their child’s life, and
 - discussing how they can make a positive impact on their child.

→ For most men, their children are their strongest motivator



4

Tailor the message (cont'):



- Promote incentives (cash, work opportunities or linkages) in the outreach message.
 - provide incentives that address barriers to attendance, such as transportation, financial incentives, help finding employment, skills building opportunities, and child care were effective in engaging fathers.



5

Develop or identify activities or program

- In what types of activities will you engage fathers?
- How and when will you conduct these activities?



5

Develop or identify activities or program (cont')

Types of programs or activities:

- Activities that are tailored to their needs
- A focus on the spousal relationship and co-parenting
- Navigating the relationship stresses of parenthood through problem-solving, goal-setting, and conflict resolution.

5

Develop or identify activities or program (cont')

Curricula for fathers:

- *24/7 Dad.*
- *Father Topics Booster sessions*
- *Mom as Gateway*
- *Inside Out Dad*
- *Understanding Dad: an Awareness Program for Moms*
- Additional resources: National Fatherhood Initiative
(www.fatherhood.org)

5

Develop or identify activities or program (cont') Delivery of program & activities

- Recognize that fathers have different needs and interests than women.
- Understand that fathers need to be educated on reproductive health and infant/child care, and their role.
- Cater to men's learning style: active participation and hands-on learning (rather than discussion)
- Deliver services in an interactive way, so fathers feel more like they're doing something and not just talking about it.
- Schedule male-focused activities during non-work hours.

→ Let fathers set their own goals and be experts in their own lives.

6

Identify community partners & resources for fathers/men:

- What agencies can become involved in addressing potential needs of fathers engaged in your program?
 - What resources are available for fathers in your community?
- Develop partnerships with local agencies that provide male-focused or male-related programs/resources.



6

Identify community partners & resources for fathers/men: (cont')

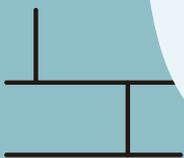
- Provide information on resources for men
- Provide referrals for men's services.



7

Assess program progress:

- ✓ How well are you engaging fathers targeted?
- ✓ What outreach strategies, messages, activities, etc., are working? What needs to be improved upon?



7

Assess program progress: (cont')

Obtain baseline information on fathers

- Intake form
- Needs assessment
- Screening tools

Example:

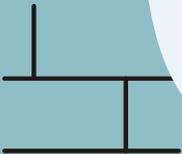
- BRO (Brief Risk Overview for men, www.brohealth.org)
- Screening tool for psycho-social risk factors that may affect men's health, their relationships and their ability to prepare for or fully engage in fatherhood.

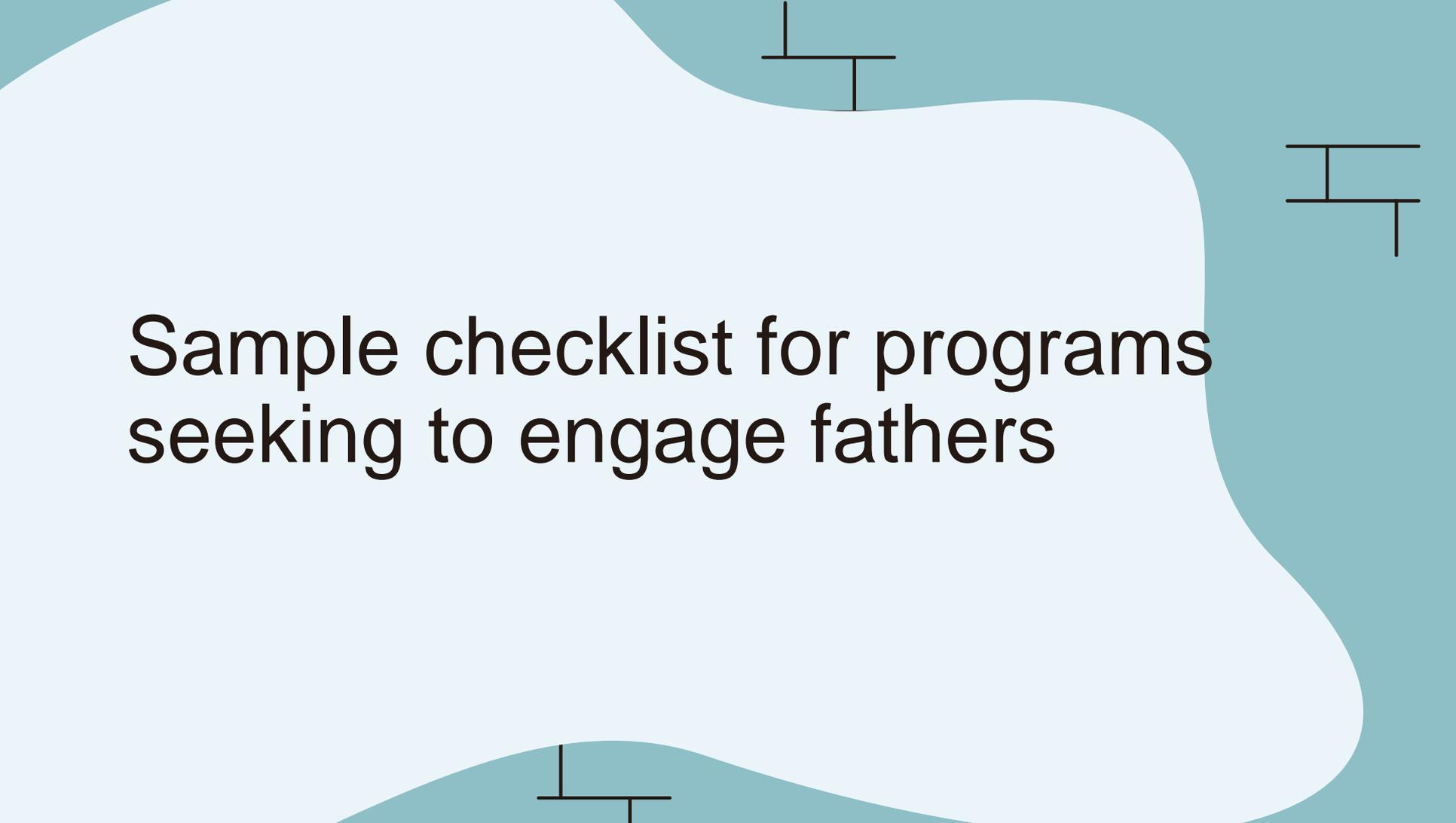
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Assess program progress: (cont')



- Obtain post-activity assessments
- Assess fathers' participation and satisfaction with various activities → provides information for continuous program improvement.
- **Focus groups or individual conversations** (formal or informal) with fathers can also be a valuable method, not only for engaging fathers in the assessment, but also obtaining their suggestions for improving the program content, outreach to other men, and potential future educational topics or activities.

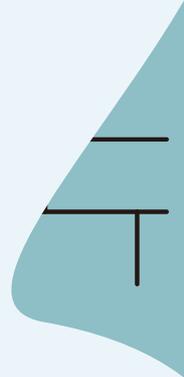
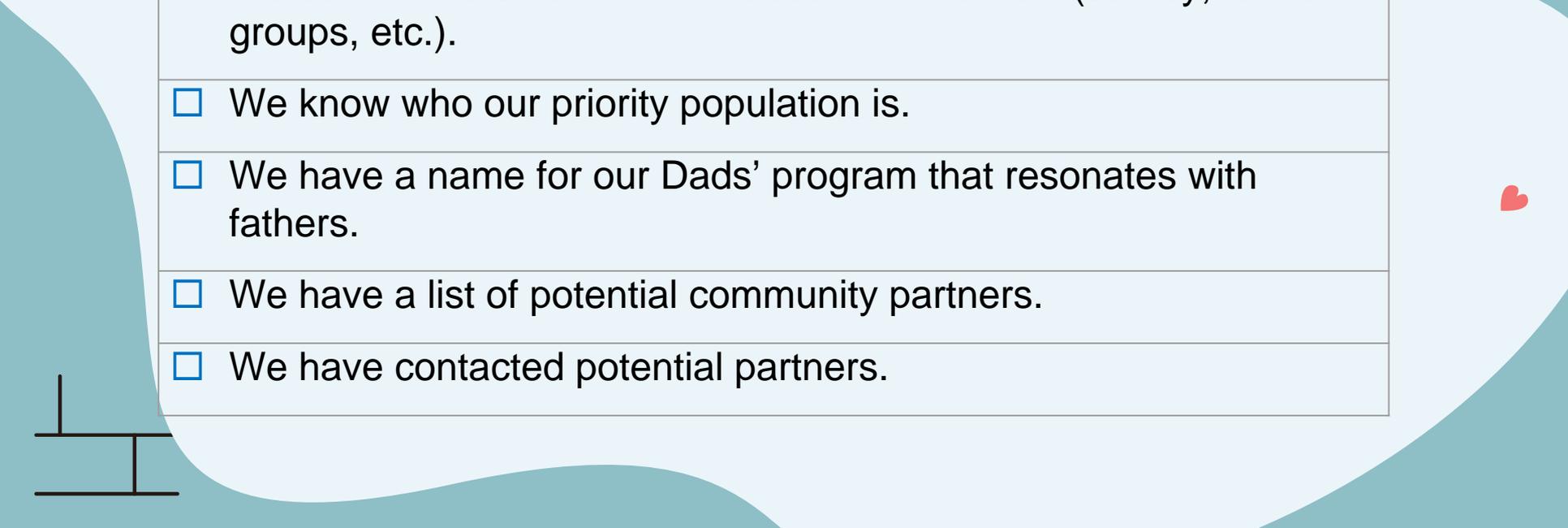
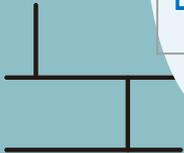




Sample checklist for programs seeking to engage fathers



Be Strategic:

- We ask fathers about their needs and interests (survey, focus groups, etc.).
 - We ask mothers about their needs and interests (survey, focus groups, etc.).
 - We know who our priority population is.
 - We have a name for our Dads' program that resonates with fathers.
 - We have a list of potential community partners.
 - We have contacted potential partners.
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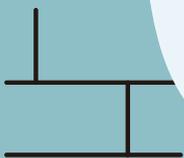


Be Methodical:

- Staff members have attended training about involving fathers.
 - We have resources, articles, etc. for staff to read and stay current on the role of fathers.
 - Female staff members are aware of their role and influence in fathering programs.
 - We provide Dads-only programs or activities.
 - We work to better integrate fathers into existing programs.
 - We have at least 2 ways fathers can connect into our programs.
 - We offer activities for fathers and children to share together.
- 



Be Welcoming:

- We have assessed the father-friendliness of our environment.
 - We have avenues to stay in touch with the men.
 - We can provide food (meals or snacks).
 - We can provide transportation for the men.
- 
- 
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Be Relevant:

- We have resources and information that speak to fathers, grandfathers, and other men.
 - Our resources cover a broad spectrum of developmental stages, from preconception to early childhood.
 - Our planned programs and resources are practical and hands-on.
 - We access referrals to services men may be looking for.
 - We have a male facilitator/point person who gives leadership.
 - We give men opportunities to provide leadership to the program.
- 
- 



In Sum...



Fathers & MIH Programs

Fathers /male partners / father figures can impact maternal & infant well-being

Fathers are often left out of preconception, Interconception and prenatal stages, but are expected to support children after birth.

The first step to engaging fathers is to get everyone on the same page



Fathers & MIH Programs

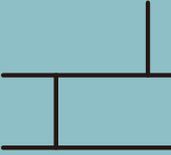
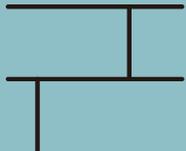
It is important to note that fathers may be the source of stress for mothers

Fathers themselves are in needs of services to enable them to maximize their potential as partner or co-parent, and father.



Programs can help fathers address their needs/issues (through referrals, for example) rather than not engaging them in the program.

Questions?
Comments?



The background is a light teal color with large, white, organic shapes. There are several black line art icons: a stylized 'H' or ladder-like shape in the top left, a similar shape in the top right, and a vertical line with a horizontal bar at the bottom center.

Thanks!

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