REAL FATHERS RESEARCH BRIEF



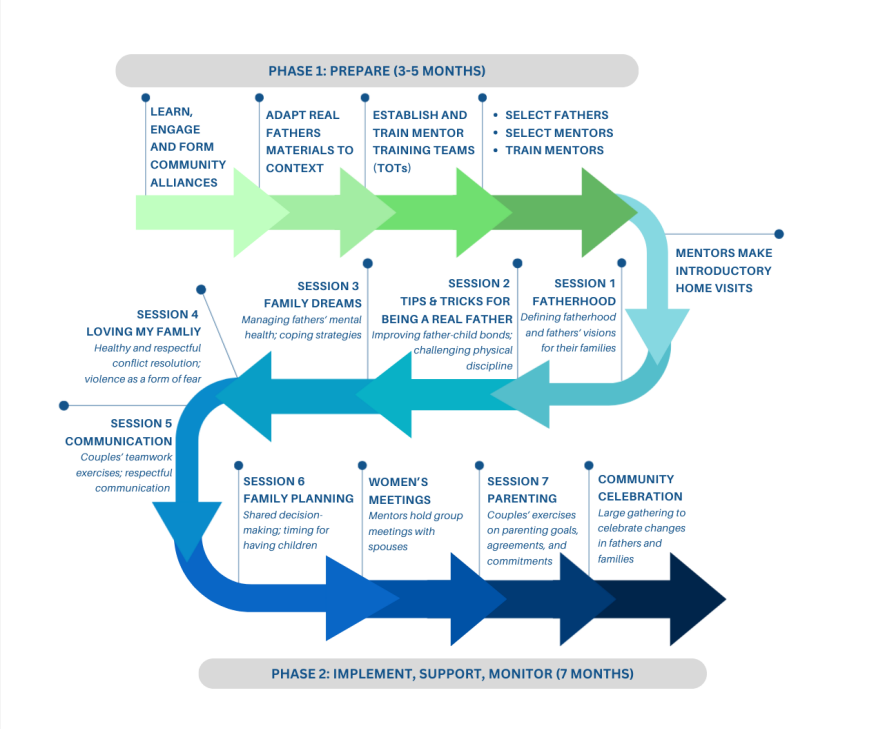
INVESTING IN FATHERS, TRANSFORMING FAMILIES: EVIDENCE FROM REAL FATHERS UGANDA (2025)

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Violence Against Children (VAC) are deeply interconnected, often occurring within the same households and reinforcing harmful patterns across generations. The 2018 Uganda Violence Against Children study confirms this link, revealing that children who grow up in violent households are more likely to perpetrate violence as adults. Exposure to violence—whether directly or indirectly—can undermine children's early development by affecting their sense of safety, emotional regulation, and long-term health and learning outcomes. Fathers play a critical role in shaping these early environments, yet they are rarely included in parenting or violence-prevention programs.

"Before joining REAL Fathers, I would sleep in bars and only go home when I wanted to eat. I had no time for my children and they feared me. I always had cases with the police for abusing my family. I believed if I didn't beat my wife and didn't drink alcohol then I am not a man enough … [Now] I stopped beating my wife, and there is peace in the home."
-REAL Fathers Participant from Ankole region

REAL Fathers (Responsible, Engaged and Loving Fathers): A Fatherhood Program to Prevent Family Violence

REAL Fathers is a multilevel social and behavior change intervention designed to strengthen positive parenting, promote non-violent child discipline, and improve respectful couple communication. By reinforcing healthy norms and skills, the program aims to support early childhood development and break intergenerational cycles of violence.



REAL Fathers trains respected older men in the community to serve as mentors for young fathers (ages 16–25) with children under age 3. Notably, mentors are selected by the young fathers themselves—without the mentors' prior knowledge—based on their exemplary behavior and respected standing in the community. This organic selection process ensures mentors are genuinely admired role models rather than self-selected candidates. Mentors deliver a 7-phase curriculum focused on parenting and communication through a mix of home visits, individual coaching, and group sessions.

The program also engages spouses and the broader community through women-only sessions, community poster campaigns, and public celebrations recognizing the achievements of mentors, young fathers, their partners, and community supporters.

UC San Diego CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH | NaNa Development Consultants | IIC The Learning Partner

With the support of The LEGO Foundation

REAL Fathers is Ugandan-led and Endorsed for National Scale

The REAL Fathers approach was developed, piloted, and proven effective in Northern Uganda and Karamoja Region (2013-2016).[1] In 2022, the Government of Uganda endorsed REAL Fathers as an implementation strategy in support of its third National Development Plan (NDP III 2021-2025) and related early childhood development policies.



With this endorsement and funding from the LEGO Foundation, The REAL Fathers Consortium—a team of Uganda- and US-based policy, research and implementation experts are working to:

1. Reach 425,000 children across six regions (Ankole, Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga, Lango, and Teso) (2023-2027);

2. Conduct a rigorous outcome evaluation to test program impact in these six new regions; and

3. Develop strategies for long-term program sustainability within existing government systems.

TESTING REAL FATHERS IN SIX NEW REGIONS

To understand how REAL Fathers works at scale, we conducted a mixed-methods evaluation grounded in government priorities, lessons from earlier implementation, and a jointly-developed Theory of Change and monitoring framework.

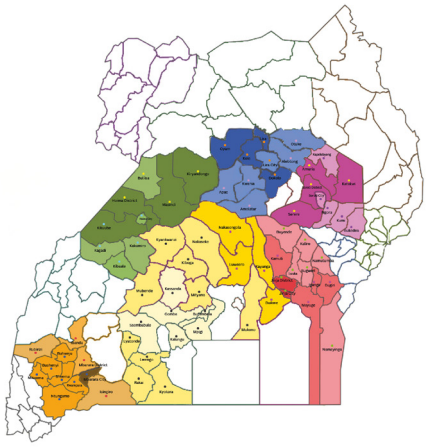
Listening to community voices: We used the Most Significant Change qualitative approach to understand how families and communities experienced the program. Implementing partners trained their community staff, who worked with mentors to identify young fathers who had shown meaningful change. Staff and mentors then gathered written, audio, and video stories from across 23 districts in six regions (June–September 2025). These stories highlight the real-world impact of the program in fathers' own words.

Measuring impact through surveys: In 2025, we also carried out a large quantitative study among young fathers. Sub-counties were randomly assigned either to receive REAL Fathers or to continue with standard services for young families. Trained enumerators conducted surveys in six local languages before the program began, immediately after it ended, and nine months later.

We used a difference-in-differences statistical approach that compares changes over time between areas that received the program and those that did not on a range of indicators. We focus here on parenting, family relationships, and violence prevention. Additional methodological details are available in the published study protocol.[2] All participants involved in research studies provided informed consent.

Implementation regions

- Ankole region
- Buganda region
- Bunyoro region
- Busoga region
- Lango region
- Teso region



1 Ashburn K, Kerner B, Ojamuge D, Lundgren R. Evaluation of the Responsible, Engaged, and Loving (REAL) Fathers Initiative on Physical Child Punishment and Intimate Partner Violence in Northern Uganda. *Prevention Science* 2017; 18(7): 854-64.

2 Barker KM, Wandiembe S, Wandega A, et al. Testing the effectiveness of the Responsible, Engaged, and Loving Fathers (REAL Fathers) intervention for improving early childhood development and reducing family violence in Uganda: Study protocol for a cluster-randomized controlled trial. *Trials* 2025; 26(1): 372.

REAL FATHERS' IMPACT ON FAMILIES: FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST STUDY COHORT (2025)

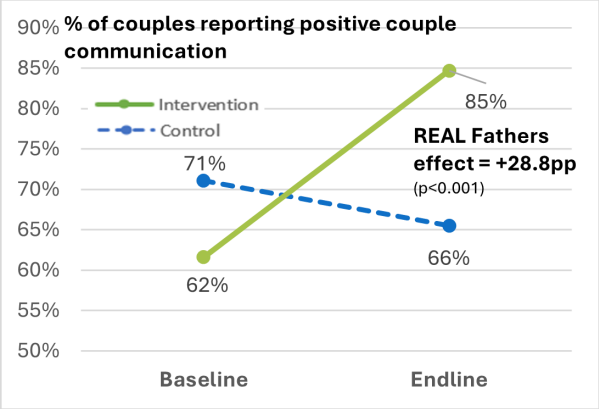
REAL Fathers improves couple communication and shared decision-making between spouses



"The most important change is how I've grown as a father. People in the community even ask, 'What has happened to this man? Why is he so close to his children now? Has his wife bewitched him?' I just laugh because I know what I'm doing is right. I now understand what it means to be a responsible father and husband." – Young Father, Teso Region

"Through the REAL Fathers sessions learned something different—that a husband and wife should sit together, plan together, and make decisions as a team. Today, my wife and I make all our decisions jointly, and this has strengthened our relationship and brought us much closer." -Young Father, Busoga Region

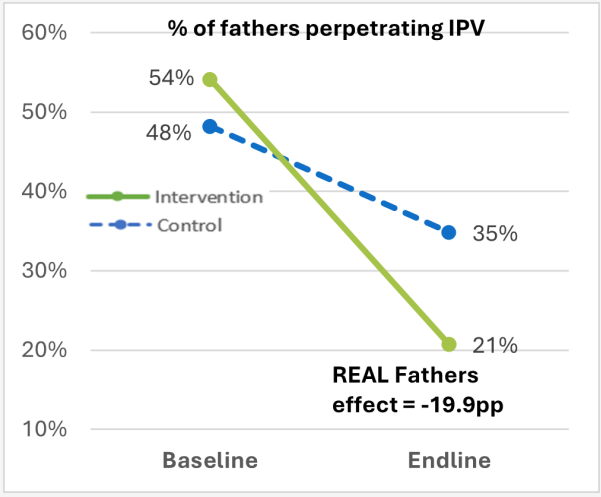
Across both the qualitative and quantitative evaluations, we saw profound personal and relational changes among young fathers who participated in REAL Fathers. Many described learning respect, open communication, and shared decision-making with their wives, leading to more peaceful homes. Fathers also reported redefining masculinity—moving from dominance and aggression to responsibility and care—and becoming more engaged in their children's lives through play, bonding, caregiving, and emotional connection.



Quantitative results reinforce these experiences. While positive couple communication declined slightly in the control group (from 71% to 66%), it increased substantially among REAL Fathers participants (from 62% to 85%). The program's impact—a 29 percentage point improvement (95% CI: 21.2, 36.5)—demonstrates a clear and significant strengthening of respectful, cooperative communication between spouses.

REAL Fathers leads to reductions in alcohol use and intimate partner violence

"Before joining the REAL Fathers Project, I had the worst drinking habits and behavior. I used to fight and beat my wife almost daily. I depended on alcohol, smoking, and gambling, and had no respect for my wife. But after joining the REAL Fathers Project, everything changed. I stopped drinking and gambling. My wife and I plan together and manage our home as a team." - Young Father, Buganda Region



Many fathers in the intervention reported using less violence against their wives—behavior that had often been normalized in the community and frequently linked to alcohol or substance use. Quantitative findings confirm these shifts. By endline, only 21% of fathers in the intervention group reported perpetrating IPV, compared to 35% in the control group—an average treatment effect (ATE) of -19.9 percentage points (95% CI: -27.9, -12.0).

The share of fathers reporting IPV perpetrated against them by their wives also declined, with 16.7% in the intervention group compared to 29.1% in the control group (ATE -12.1 percentage points; 95% CI: -19.9, -4.3; p=0.002). These findings demonstrate meaningful reductions in bidirectional violence and improvements in household safety.

In addition to reductions in violence, fathers in the intervention group reported significantly lower alcohol use. On average, the expected frequency of alcohol consumption was 31% lower among REAL Fathers participants compared to the control group (ATE: 0.69; 95% CI: 0.56–0.86; p=0.001).

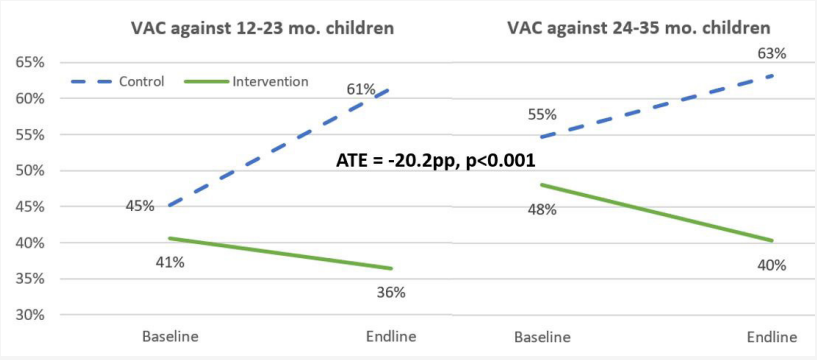
REAL Fathers improves father-child interactions

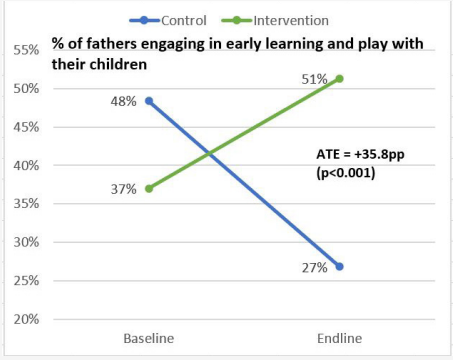
"I used to beat my child, even when she was very young. I had no love for her. I remember when she was very young, whenever she cried, I would pinch her. Even when she made mistakes, I would either yell at her or wait for her mother to come and help her. But now, I comfort her, bathe her, and play with her."
– Young Father, Buganda Region



As compared to the control arm, REAL Fathers successfully enhanced multiple father-child relationship factors, including:

- Fathers' reduced use of violent child discipline
- Fathers' engagement in early learning and play activities with their children, and affection towards their children
- Fathers' understanding of positive parenting practices and child disciplining, a key objective of the program
- Fathers' self-reported self-efficacy and confidence in positive parenting skills
- Fathers' providing a dedicated play space at home for their children





REAL Fathers improves economic productivity and livelihood

"Now, after the mentorship, everything has changed. We plan together, whether it's cultivating crops or selling produce like maize, we do it as a team and decide together how to use the income." – Young Father, Teso Region



Financially, in partnership with their spouses, many fathers learned to financially plan, save, and even start new businesses, improving their economic stability and sense of partnership. The ripple effects of the program extended beyond participants, as reformed fathers became informal role models and mentors to other young fathers in their communities. These shifts earned them newfound respect and trust from their families and communities, with some taking on leadership and mentorship roles in youth church groups and financial savings groups.

REAL Fathers increased community members' trust and respect of the young fathers

Across regions, REAL Fathers has successfully linked over 7,000 young fathers to Uganda's Parish Development Model (PDM), integrating mentorship with economic empowerment. Through PDM-supported livelihoods—such as farming, livestock rearing, small enterprises, and savings groups—fathers experienced improved income stability, reduced household conflict, stronger joint decision-making with spouses, and greater ability to provide for their children's basic needs. These findings highlight how combining fatherhood mentorship with existing government economic platforms amplifies both livelihood and family wellbeing outcomes.

New-found trust and respect from community members, leading to overall norms shifting in communities

> ***"In my community, people have built more trust in me because of the change in my behavior, they have even entrusted in me a Catechist position in the Church to lead the people of God" – Young Father, Ankole Region***

Many community members noticed rapid and substantial change in young fathers, especially sharing roles traditionally reserved for women. These shifts in behavior were seen as a notable break from conventional community norms. REAL Fathers participants have become informal leaders and mentors to other fathers and families, creating a ripple effect of positive change across their communities.

CONCLUSION: FROM EVIDENCE TO NATIONAL SCALE

With formal endorsement under Uganda's NDP III and IV and strong evidence of impact across multiple regions, districts, and implementation models, REAL Fathers is ready to transition from successful scale-up to system-level integration. Embedding REAL Fathers within district and national systems positions Uganda as a global leader in father engagement, with the potential to reach 1 million young families by 2030—including families in regions and districts not yet reached by current implementation.

Achieving this goal requires government partnership and targeted investment to institutionalize a proven model. The REAL Fathers Consortium is currently conducting a costing analysis and testing alternative implementation pathways (government-led, hybrid, and CSO-led with government oversight). Findings will inform a national convening in early 2026, but several immediate actions can be taken now.

PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR GOVERNMENT CHAMPIONS

- Integrate REAL Fathers into district community development programming.
- Adopt the mentor model within MoGLSD Family Strengthening initiatives. Draw lessons from the REAL Fathers mentorship model in the implementation of the National Standards for Parenting Programmes in Uganda.
- Embed father engagement indicators within child wellbeing, ECD, and GBV monitoring frameworks.

PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR LOCAL FUNDERS

- Invest in district-level scale-up in priority regions. Currently, sub-regions including Kigezi, Tooro, Karamoja, Bukedi, Bugisu, Sebei, Acholi, and West Nile remain uncovered. Even within Buganda, several districts—particularly fully urban and island districts—are not yet targeted, despite having an equally pressing need for this intervention.
- Support development of a government-led delivery model leveraging existing community structures.

By acting now, Uganda can move from proof of impact to sustained national reach, ensuring that effective father engagement becomes a core component of child and family wellbeing systems nationwide.

Recommended citation: *University of California San Diego, Center on Gender Equity and Health (UCSD-GEH), NaNa Development Consultants, LTD, and Impact and Innovation Development Center (IIDC). 2025. Investing in fathers, transforming families: Evidence from REAL Fathers Uganda – A research brief. La Jolla, California, USA and Kampala, Uganda. Dec.*