REAL FATHERS | POLICY & ADVOCACY BRIEF

REDUCING HOUSEHOLD VIOLENCE BY ENGAGING FATHERS CAN TRANSFORM CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN UGANDA

EVIDENCE FROM REAL FATHERS ACROSS SIX SUBREGIONS

Violence within families undermines child development, human capital formation, and household resilience, slowing progress toward NDP IV goals. REAL Fathers (Responsible, Engaged and Loving Fathers) addresses this by engaging young men as partners in violence prevention, positive parenting, and family wellbeing.

Violence against women and children remains widespread in Uganda, with intimate partner violence (IPV) and violence against children (VAC) frequently occurring within the same households. These forms of violence reinforce harmful patterns across generations, limiting children's ability to thrive. Despite fathers' central role in shaping early childhood environments, men are rarely included in prevention and family-strengthening efforts.



"I no longer beat my child. I comfort her, bathe her, and play with her." — Young Father, Buganda Subregion"
– Young Father, Buganda Region

A PROVEN, UGANDAN-LED MODEL FOR FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

REAL Fathers is a Ugandan-developed, evidence-based fatherhood intervention that strengthens families and shifts harmful gender and parenting norms. It is low-cost, high-impact, and designed for scale.

First developed in Northern Uganda and Karamoja, the program uses respected older fathers as community mentors to support young fathers (ages 16–25) with children under three years old. Through seven structured mentoring sessions—combined with engagement of spouses and community members—**fathers build skills in:**

- Non-violent parenting
- Respectful couple communication and conflict resolution
- Active father involvement in early childhood development

With demonstrated success, REAL Fathers has been formally endorsed under Uganda's National Development Plans (NDP III and IV) and aligned with national ECD and family strengthening frameworks. It is currently implemented across six subregions of Uganda.

KEY LEARNINGS FROM IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Engaged fathers create safer, more nurturing early childhood environments

REAL Fathers strengthened multiple dimensions of father–child relationships critical for early childhood development:

- Reduced use of violent child discipline
- Increased play, caregiving, and affection
- Greater confidence in positive parenting skills
- Improved child-friendly play spaces within homes

Real Fathers makes couple relationships safer and more cooperative

Participation led to major improvements in respectful communication and shared decision-making.

"Today, my wife and I make all our decisions jointly. This has strengthened our relationship and brought us much closer." — Young Father, Busoga Subregion

29%

Increase in positive couple communication

- Couples communicate more respectfully and plan together.
- Household conflict declines, and women report greater safety and support.
- Positive couple communication increased by nearly 29 percentage points among participants, while declining in comparison communities.



Engaging men reduces alcohol use and intimate partner violence

Before joining REAL Fathers, many fathers described alcohol use and violence as normalized aspects of family life. Program participation supported men to reduce harmful drinking and adopt non-violent behaviors, resulting in meaningful gains in household safety and stability.

- Alcohol-use and related conflict declined.
- IPV dropped substantially.

Household change creates ripple effects across communities

Behavior change within families led to broader community-level benefits:

- Improved household financial planning and economic productivity.
- Increased trust and respect for participating fathers.
- Emergence of fathers as role models and informal mentors.

"I believed if I didn't beat my wife and didn't drink alcohol then I am not a man enough...[now] there is peace in the home." — Young Father, Ankole Subregion

20%

Lower intimate partner violence reported among REAL Fathers compared to the control group

"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." — Young Father, Ankole Subegion

REAL FATHERS IS READY FOR SYSTEM INTEGRATION

REAL Fathers aligns closely with Uganda's existing community development structures and national priorities on ECD, GBV prevention, and family strengthening—making it well suited for government-led or hybrid scale.

PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP

- **Integrate REAL Fathers within the District Development Plans,** with dedicated budget lines
- **Adopt the mentor model** within MoGLSD Family Strengthening Initiatives and National Parenting Programme standards
- **Embed father engagement indicators** in ECD, GBV, and child wellbeing monitoring systems

STRATEGIC INVESTMENT PRIORITIES FOR FUNDERS

- Support district-level expansion in priority regions
- Invest in government-led and hybrid delivery models
- Finance mentor training and district capacity-building

A costing analysis is underway and will be available in late 2026 to guide scale and sustainability planning.



POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS: EMBEDDING FATHER ENGAGEMENT INTO NATIONAL SYSTEMS

Scaling the impact of REAL Fathers requires coordinated integration across Uganda's legal, policy, and service delivery frameworks.

Strengthen national policy and legal frameworks

- Explicitly incorporate father-focused parenting interventions within the **Children Act** as part of early prevention and family strengthening strategies
- Recognize and finance father mentorship as a core nurturing care strategy within the **National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECD) Policy and Action Plan**
- Update the **National Parenting Guidelines and Standards** to emphasize father engagement, play-based learning, and non-violent discipline as minimum service standards
- Integrate father-inclusive approaches within the **ECCE Policy**, positioning fathers as co-educators and caregivers

Integrate fathers across health and social services

- Include fathers in **maternal and child health, family planning, and immunization outreach,** with structured referral pathways to mentoring groups
- Promote father-friendly clinic practices and counseling services
- Link father mentorship participation to **youth livelihood and social protection programs,** with inclusive verification mechanisms

Institutionalize father engagement within decentralized service platforms

- Embed REAL Fathers mentorship groups within the **Parish Development Model (PDM)** and District Development Plans
- Include father engagement indicators within Parish Development Plans and the **Parish-Based Management Information System (PBMIS)**
- Leverage community mobilization structures to reach young fathers early

Build national capacity and strengthen monitoring systems

- Train **Health Workers, Village Health Teams (VHTs), and Parasocial Workers in father engagement**, nurturing care, and positive parenting
- Support ongoing skills development for fathers in caregiving, co-parenting, and conflict resolution
- Incorporate father engagement indicators into **national monitoring frameworks,** including: Participation rate, use of positive discipline, reductions in IPV and household conflict
- Use household assessment tools (e.g., child development and nurturing care measures) to track outcomes and guide adaptive scale-up



CALL TO ACTION

Uganda has a unique opportunity to institutionalize father engagement as a core pillar of violence prevention, early childhood development, and family wellbeing. **By embedding proven models like REAL Fathers within national systems, Uganda's government can:**

- Reduce household violence
- Improve child development outcomes
- Strengthen families and communities
- Advance Uganda's leadership in evidence-based family policy

FOR MORE INFORMATION

A wealth of resources and materials designed to support and empower fathers in their important role as caregivers and mentors – and additional information about IIDC's current efforts to scale REAL Fathers across six regions of Uganda–can be found online: https://iidcug.org/proj/scaling-up-real-fathers-approach-in-uganda/

More information on the impact evaluation (a cluster randomized controlled trial) is available on the University of California's site: https://geh.ucsd.edu/catalyzing-real-fathers-across-uganda-for-early-learning-and-play

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