# REAL FATHERS

**RESEARCH BRIEF** | October 2026

## INVESTING IN FATHERS, TRANSFORMING FAMILIES:
## A RESEARCH BRIEF ON MIXED-METHODS ENDLINE FINDINGS FROM REAL FATHERS-UGANDA (2025-2026)

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 latest Uganda Violence Against Children study (2018) confirms this link, revealing that children who grow up in violent households are more likely to perpetrate violence as adults.[1] 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.[2] Fathers play a critical role in shaping these early environments, yet remain underrepresented in parenting and violence prevention programs.[3]

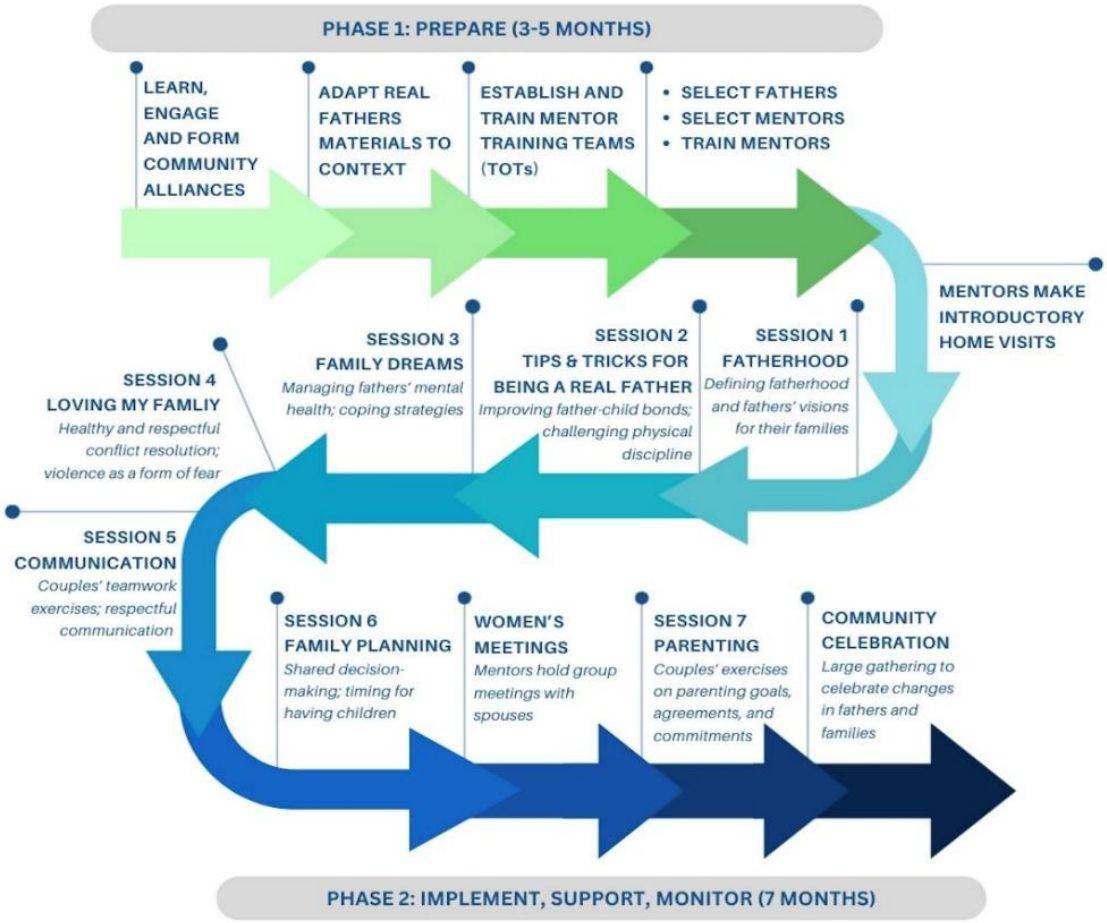
### REAL Fathers (Responsible, Engaged and Loving Fathers): A Fatherhood Program to Prevent Family Violence

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.[4]

> *"In our culture, a man was not supposed to be too close to his wife or help out with home duties. But after going through the mentorship sessions, I've come to understand that helping at home doesn't reduce my value as a man, in fact, it shows strength. Now, in my community, I'm known for having a good relationship with my wife and for being a present father. I've learned to love my wife, care for my children, and value peace and harmony in my household and community.*
>
> *– REAL Fathers Participant from Uganda's Teso region*

REAL Fathers trains respected older men in the community to serve as mentors for young fathers (ages 16–25) whose youngest child is under the age of 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.

[1] Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development. (2018). Uganda Violence Against Children Survey: Findings from a National Survey, 2015. UNICEF: Kampala, Uganda.
[2] Shonkoff JP, Garner AS; Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, et al. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*. 129(1):e232–e246.
[3] Jeong J, Sullivan EF, McCann JK, McCoy DC, Yousafzai AK. (2023). Implementation characteristics of father-inclusive interventions in low- and middle-income countries: a systematic review. *Ann N Y Acad Sci*. 1520(1):34–52.
[4] Ashburn K, Kerner B, Ojamuge D, Lundgren R. (2017). Evaluation of the Responsible, Engaged, and Loving (REAL) Fathers Initiative on Physical Child Punishment and Intimate Partner Violence in Northern Uganda. *Prevention Science*. **18**(7): 854-64.




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.

## 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). Since program inception in 2013, the program has developed partnerships between Uganda- and US-based policy, research, and implementation experts—known as the 'REAL Fathers Consortium.' The Consortium also includes a dedicated Advisory Board, comprised of officials from: the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Education and Sports; the National Planning Authority; and the Office of the Prime Minister. 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. REAL Fathers was included again in Uganda's fourth NDP (NDP IV, 2026-2030).



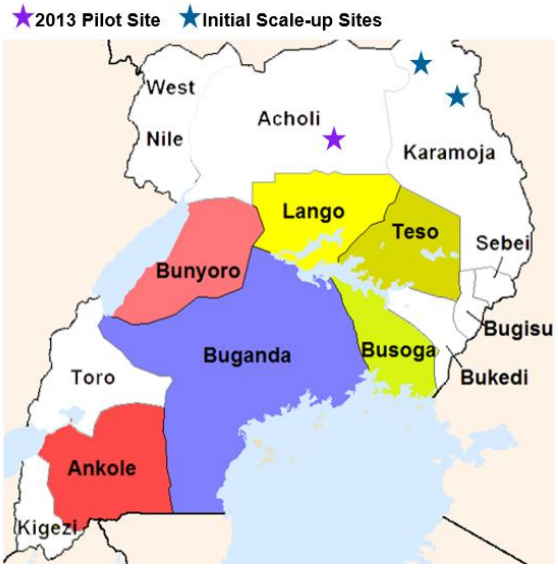
With this lasting government endorsement and a multi-year investment from the LEGO Foundation (2023-2027), the REAL Fathers Consortium is building upon the program's strong evidence base to:

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

This research brief summarizes key findings from the outcome evaluation, highlighting REAL Fathers' impact across six new regions.

## TESTING REAL FATHERS IN SIX NEW REGIONS

To understand how REAL Fathers works at scale, we conducted a mixed-methods evaluation, combining a large quantitative study with Most Significant Change qualitative storytelling across Ankole, Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga, Lango, and Teso regions. The evaluation strategies were grounded in government priorities, lessons from earlier rounds of 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*:** Between October 2023 and June 2026, we carried out baseline and endline surveys among two study cohorts for a cluster-randomized controlled trial (cRCT) among young fathers and their female partners (n=3,421 couple dyads). Sub-counties were randomly assigned either to receive REAL Fathers or waitlisted to continue with standard services until the end of the evaluation study. Trained enumerators conducted surveys in six local languages before the REAL Fathers program began and one month after it ended. Additional methodological details are available in the published study protocol.[5]

To examine program impact on our outcome indicators, we used a difference-in-differences statistical approach that compares changes over time between areas that received the program and those that did not (i.e., mixed-effects difference-in-differences logistic regression models, accounting for the clustered study design). This brief focuses on findings related to family relationships, violence prevention, and parenting practices. All participants involved in research studies provided informed consent.

[5] Barker KM, Wandiembe S, Wandega A, et al. (2025). 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*. **26**(1): 372.

## REAL FATHERS' IMPACT: SHIFTING FATHERHOOD NORMS, TRANSFORMING FAMILIES



*"Before the program, [my wife and I] were always quarreling. I thought my only job was to provide, and [my wife] had to do everything at home, including taking care of the child. But after [attending] the first few sessions, I applied what I learned at home. Better communication replaced the fighting; now we do things together."*

*– Young Father, Bunyoro Region*

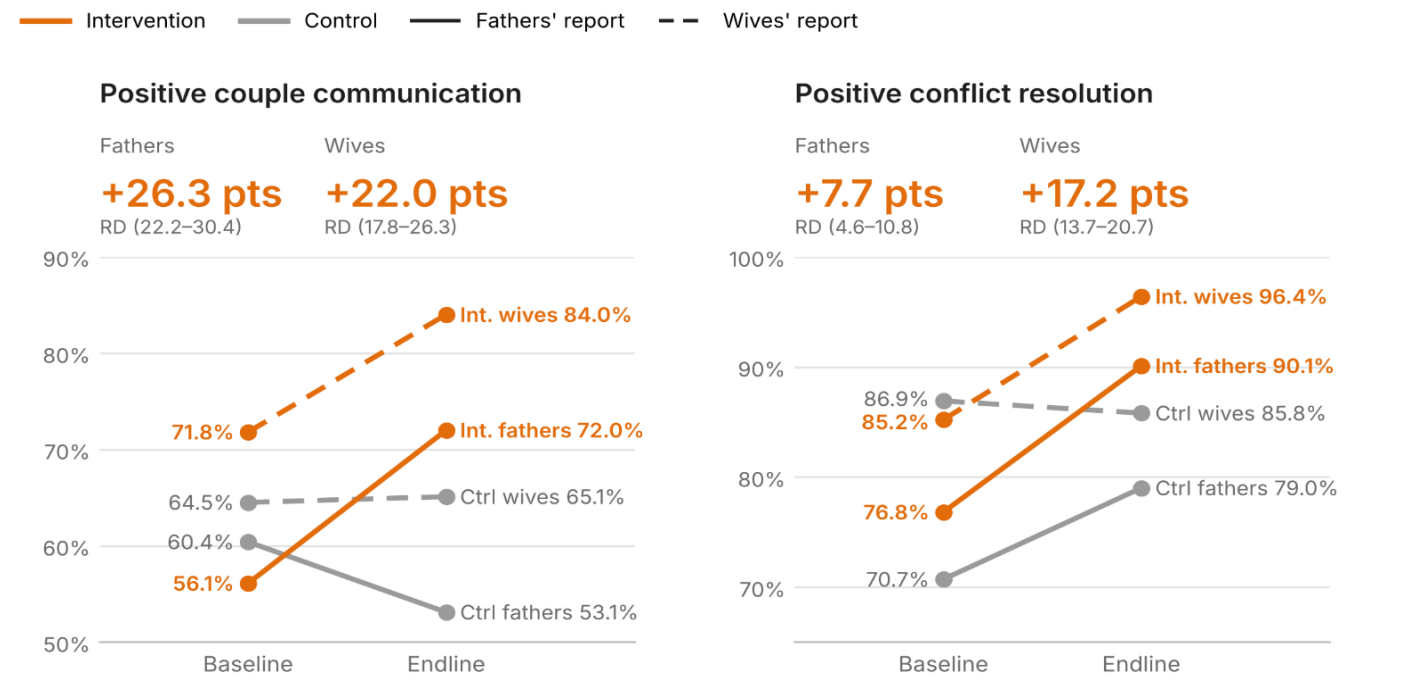
In both the qualitative and quantitative data, we saw profound personal and relational changes among the young fathers and female partners who participated in REAL Fathers. Many fathers described learning respect, open communication, and shared decision-making with their wives, leading to more peaceful 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.

### *Impact: REAL Fathers improves couple communication and conflict resolution*

*"Before, he treated me harshly, even when I was calm. But now, even when we disagree, he talks to me calmly. I had wanted to leave him, but now we make decisions together as a family."*

*- Wife of young father, Busoga Region*

Survey results echo these stories. Among REAL Fathers participants, positive couple communication rose from 56.1% to 72.0%; in the control group it fell from 60.4% to 53.1%. That is a 26-percentage-point gain for REAL Fathers participants relative to the control group (RD = 26.3; 95% CI: 22.2–30.4; **Graph 1**). Fathers also reported better conflict resolution (RD = 7.7; 95% CI: 4.6–10.8). Wives of REAL Fathers participants also reported gains in both positive couple communication (RD = 22.0; 95% CI: 17.8–26.3) and conflict resolution (RD = 17.2; 95% CI: 13.7–20.7).




RD = adjusted risk difference (difference-in-differences), percentage points (95% CI). All p<0.001.

**Graph 1. REAL Fathers effect on positive couple communication and conflict resolution**

## *Impact: REAL Fathers leads to reductions intimate partner violence*

*"I drank heavily, constantly quarreled with my wife… at times, I even chased my wife and children out of the house, forcing them to sleep outside… I stopped drinking and fighting, and now whenever we face any disagreement in our marriage, we resolve it peacefully using the yellow card method we were taught during sessions."*

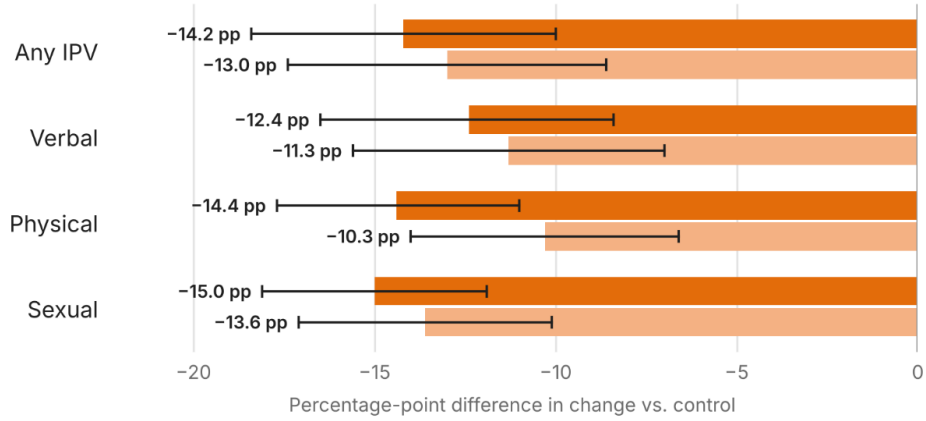
- Young Father, Lango Region

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 use. Quantitative findings confirm these shifts.

By endline, 31% of fathers in the intervention group reported perpetrating IPV, compared to 47% in the control group—an average treatment effect (ATE) of -14.2 percentage points (95% CI: -18.49, -10.0). This finding (**Graph 2)** shows how much more IPV declined among REAL Fathers couples than control couples from baseline to endline.




*Figure 1. REAL Fathers Yellow Card, a de-escalation tool couples use to pause heated arguments and guide structured communication*




Bars = adjusted risk difference (difference-in-differences); lines = 95% CI. All p<0.001.

**Graph 2. REAL Fathers effect on husbands' IPV against wives (past 3 months)**

The share of fathers reporting that their wives had perpetrated IPV against them also declined, with 25.0% in the intervention group compared to 29.8% in the control group (ATE -12.1 percentage points; 95% CI: -16.3, -8.0; p<0.001). These findings demonstrate meaningful reductions in bidirectional violence and improvements in household safety (bidirectional violence results not pictured).

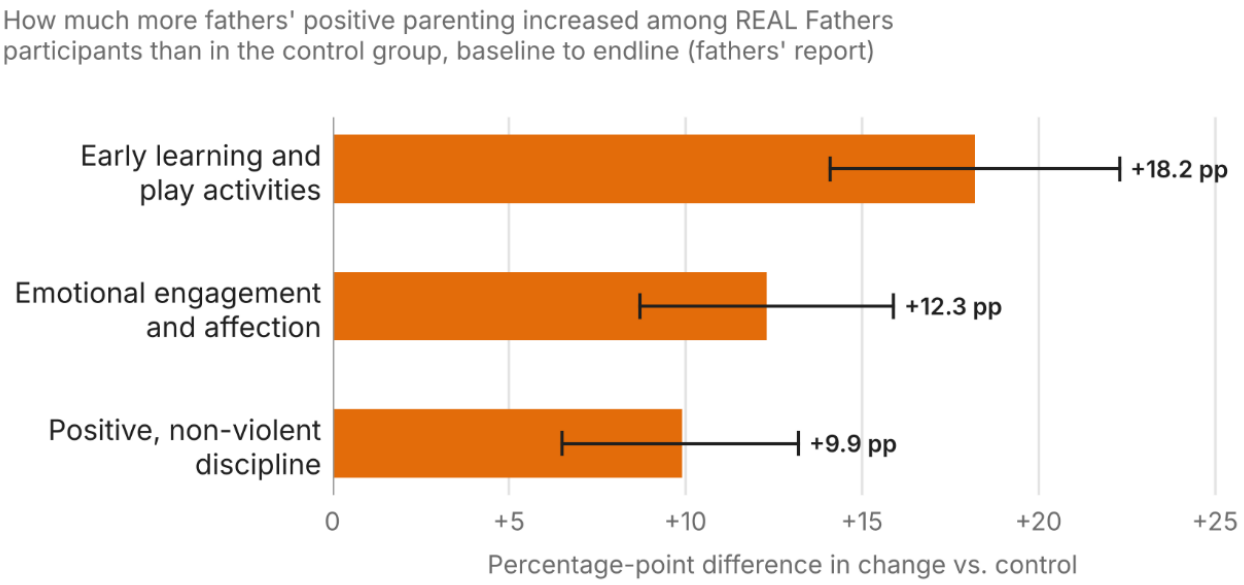
## *Impact: REAL Fathers improves father-child interactions*

*"I have created time to be at home now days where I participate in playing with my child, escort my child to school in the morning, bathe and sometimes help the mother to wash the clothing for my child. I also took my child for immunization, which I couldn't do before the mentorship process."*

*– Young Father, Ankole Region*



Survey results also demonstrated that REAL Fathers participants became more engaged with their children than fathers in the control group. Participants were 18 percentage points more likely to report early learning and play activities with their child (RD = 18.2; 95% CI: 14.1–22.3) and 12 points more likely to report emotional engagement and affection (RD = 12.3; 95% CI: 8.7–15.9). They were also 10 points more likely to use positive, non-violent forms of child discipline (RD = 9.9; 95% CI: 6.5–13.2) (**Graph 3**).




**Graph 3. REAL Fathers effect on play, engagement, and positive discipline**

### *Impact: Does REAL Fathers reduce violence against children?*

Early evidence says yes. In the Cohort 2 evaluation across 32 sub-counties, fathers in REAL Fathers communities reported less violent discipline on every measure. Fathers' use of violent discipline a few times or many times was about one-third lower (28% vs 40% in the control group). Severe physical punishment (hitting a child's face or head, or beating a child) was roughly halved (10% vs 18%). Effects were largest among fathers of infants and young toddlers, when parenting habits are forming. Finally, fewer fathers in REAL Fathers communities reported using any violent discipline at all in the past three months (46% vs 54%). While this difference points in the same direction as the other findings, it was not statistically conclusive under the study's most rigorous test. This measure uses the same items as the MICS module for SDG indicator 16.2.1, over a three-month recall period. The measure counts even a single instance—such as shouting once—and these occasional behaviors are the hardest to eliminate in the short term. Taken together, the findings suggest REAL Fathers first reduces how often and how severely fathers use violent discipline, an important step toward ending it entirely.

### *Impact: REAL Fathers improves economic productivity and livelihood*

*" …when I earn 100,000 UGX, I give my wife 50,000 UGX and use the rest to invest [in my VSLA]. Together, we plan for our future and have decided to start a salon business for my wife next year."*

*– Young Father, Buganda 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 REAL Fathers participants 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.



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

*"After the mentorship, I realized the value of respect and community service. I now help the elderly and engage positively with my neighbors. Because of these changes, the community has recognized my transformation. I was even elected as the youth chairperson for my village."*

*– Young Father, Teso 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 positive 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 will depend on government leadership and targeted investment to institutionalise a proven model. The REAL Fathers Consortium's micro-costing analysis shows the programme can be delivered at reasonable cost: it reached 153,579 young fathers at an average of UGX 96,353 per father enrolled. Costs per father fell as delivery grew, which points to economies of scale. Personnel for training and supervision was the largest cost driver (37%). Building on these findings, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) is well placed to lead a costed national roadmap for phased scale-up, with civil society and development partners providing technical, implementation and financing support. Several of the priority actions listed below can begin immediately.

### *Priority Actions for Government*

- **Integrate REAL Fathers into district plans and budgets.** Beginning with current implementation areas, districts should include REAL Fathers in development plans, workplans and budgets. Coordination should sit with Community Development Officers, with annual targets for young fathers, their spouses and children under three. Plans should specify how mentors will be selected, trained and supervised: IIDC and partner master trainers and ToTs provide training, and district Community Based Services departments provide supervision. Progress reviews should track both families reached and delivery of core sessions.
- **Protect the elements that produced these results.** As the programme expands, it should keep the components behind the endline findings: mentor contact, home visits, group sessions, spouse engagement and community activities. These should continue to build respectful couple communication, joint decision-making, non-violent discipline, and fathers' involvement in caregiving and play. Aligning delivery with the National Standards for Parenting Programmes[6] will support consistent quality. Implementation reviews should look at what fathers apply at home, not only session attendance.
- **Make safeguarding a precondition for expansion.** Mentors need clear referral pathways for IPV and child-protection concerns, and must know when a concern should be referred rather than handled within the mentoring relationship.

[6] UNICEF Uganda. (2025). National Parenting Training Manual for Uganda and National Standards for Parenting Programmes in Uganda. https://www.unicef.org/uganda/reports/national-parenting-training-manual-uganda

- **Build outcome monitoring into government systems.** Routine monitoring should track reach, equity, quality and safeguarding. Periodic independent evaluations should assess whether gains in couple communication, IPV, father–child engagement and violent discipline are sustained.

### *Priority Actions for Development Partners and Funders*

- **Invest in phased expansion to underserved sub-regions**. Acholi, Bukedi, Bugisu, Karamoja, Kigezi, Madi, Rwenzori, Sebei, Tooro and West Nile have not yet been reached, nor have some fully urban and island districts in Buganda. Selection of first districts should weigh need, readiness, equity and available resources, including a capable implementing partner and workable supervision arrangements.
- **Use the costing evidence to agree a financing pathway**. Support government to compare government-led, hybrid and civil-society delivery (with government oversight). The comparison should determine which costs districts can absorb, which need partner support, and the minimum resources required to sustain core components as coverage grows. Budgets should cover the full delivery model, including mentor training, supervision, safeguarding, referrals and monitoring, not curriculum delivery alone.

These steps offer a practical route from evidence to national coverage: expanding REAL Fathers without losing the mentorship, family engagement and community support behind the changes fathers and their partners describe, and continuing to measure outcomes as the programme reaches new settings.





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our gratitude goes to the REAL Fathers implementing partners who ably led the geographic expansion of REAL Fathers across the six regions: Action for Rural Women's Empowerment, All Nations Child Development Centre, Bantwana Initiative Uganda, Children's Chance International, Forum for African Women Educationalists Uganda Chapter, Holistic Initiative to Community Development, Lake Albert Children and Women's Development Organization, Somero Development Initiative Uganda, Vision Teso Rural Development Organization, Western Ankole Civil Society Organizations Forum. Special thanks to Joyce Kyeyune for the design of this brief. Finally, we are indebted to the families that contributed to the evaluation study and participated in the Most Significant Change story collection for sharing the time, insights, and experiences with our research team.

**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). 2026. *Investing in fathers, transforming families: A research brief on mixed-methods endline findings from REAL Fathers-Uganda.* La Jolla, California, USA and Kampala, Uganda. October.