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“WHAT WORKS” IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS? TEN LESSONS FROM EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

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Background

“What works” in fatherhood programs? As the responsible fatherhood field continues to grow, an increasing number of programs have been put into place to improve fathers’ involvement with children and families. While several studies have examined the effects of programs on outcomes for fathers and their families, results of these studies vary, as does the quality and rigor of research methods. Only rigorous evaluations of programs can provide evidence of whether or not programs have the desired effect. Fortunately, the existence of several rigorous evaluations of recent fatherhood and parenting programs allow us to make preliminary conclusions about those features that make for effective fatherhood programs. This brief identifies 10 common features of “model” fatherhood programs.

Model Programs

Model fatherhood programs are defined as those that examine outcomes for fathers and their families and:

- Have been experimentally evaluated;
- Have a sample size for evaluation that exceeds 30 in both the treatment and control group;
- Retain at least 60% of the original sample for the evaluation;
- Have at least one outcome that is positively changed by 10%;
- Have at least one outcome with a substantial effect size that is statistically significant at the 0.05 level; and
- Have been evaluated by an independent, external evaluator with publicly available evaluation results.¹

Model programs fulfilling these criteria were:

- Dads for Life;
- The Family Transition Program;
- Parenting Together;
- The PEACE Program;
- Preparing for the Drug Free Years;
- Responsible Fatherhood Program for Incarcerated Dads – Fairfax County;
- Video Self-Modeling Effects of Parenting Education on First-Time Fathers; and
- Young Dads.

“What Works” in Fatherhood Programs?

Among the programs identified, those with curricula and with evidence that they have measurable influences on fathers and families share 10 common features. These features reflect different aspects of teaching and the particular content of programs. There is no evidence to suggest which combination of these characteristics contributes to the overall success of these programs, nor is there evidence that each program had each of these characteristics.

What Works Strategy # 1: Incorporate teaching methods and materials that are culturally appropriate for fathers and populations being served.

What Works Strategy # 2: Select teachers and facilitators who believe in the program being implemented and provide them with relevant training and coaching.

What Works Strategy # 3: Effective programs have a high staff-participant ratio.

What Works Strategy # 4: Target curricula and set clear goals to be achieved by the program.

What Works Strategy # 5: Use theory-based approaches that have been effective in influencing parenting behaviors in other contexts.

What Works Strategy # 6: Employ a variety of teaching methods designed to focus on fathers as individuals and, in doing so, personalize the information.

What Works Strategy # 7: Allow sufficient time to complete important core program activities.

What Works Strategy # 8: Have staff who engage in one-on-one relationships with fathers.

What Works Strategy # 9: Provide incentives to engage fathers and families.

What Works Strategy # 10: Replicate curricula with fidelity.

What Works Strategy #1: Incorporate teaching methods and materials that are culturally appropriate for fathers and populations being served.

Model programs tailored their materials to serve the population of fathers and their families and were culturally sensitive in the provision of various services and components. In order to maximize positive outcomes, the materials or curriculum used in a program should be appropriate for an individual program’s target population. Because different populations have different needs and cultural norms, considering your target population is critical when choosing a program model.

- When possible, hire staff members who resemble your target population in age, culture, gender, or personal background. Effective programs have often used staff members that come from the same cultural group or a similar living environment as its target population so that participants can better relate to staff.
 - Fathers often respond better to male staff than to female staff,ⁱ and may feel more comfortable expressing fears and problems when they are in a program led and attended by other men like themselves.ⁱⁱ
 - Fathers may be more open to ideas and skills that come from someone who has experienced similar issues than from someone who they see as unlike themselves: for example, fathers in an employability program may respond more positively to staff members who have also faced issues with employment or self-sufficiency.
 - For example, the *Young Dads* program, which targeted African-American adolescent fathers, used male social workers as staff. These men were thought to be better equipped to serve young fathers.
- Needs of different groups may vary. For example, low-income fathers may need employment services (such as help searching for jobs and writing resumes), and immigrant fathers may need English classes or legal assistance. A program that has been used only with Caucasian fathers may not be as effective when used with fathers of other racial or ethnic backgrounds; similarly, a program that has been used with incarcerated fathers (such as the *Responsible Fatherhood Program for Incarcerated Dads* in Fairfax County, Virginia) may not be effective for fathers without a criminal history.
- Additionally, cultural norms about what it means to be a “good father” will vary for different populations. Some men may believe that being a good father mainly involves supporting children financially.ⁱⁱⁱ By contrast, many Asian cultures believe that the father’s primary role is to discipline his children.^{iv}
 - In order to account for cultural differences, some curricula include materials to help facilitators adapt their program to specific groups through steps such as conducting sessions in languages other than English, adding information on discipline or other topics of particular interest to the group, and discussing discrimination and/or racism.^v

What Works Strategy #2: Select teachers and facilitators who believe in the program being implemented and provide them with relevant training and coaching.

Programs that have well-trained instructors or facilitators have more positive outcomes.^{vi} Research suggests that instructors, case workers, and facilitators may all be more effective when they believe that a program’s curriculum is worthwhile and have been well trained in using it.

- Selecting program leaders who have substantial experience working “in the field” may help to increase the impact of program delivery on fathers.^{vii} These individuals may already understand fathers’ needs, issues that arise in working with fathers, and strategies that are affective in addressing fathers’ needs. For example, leaders in the *PEACE Program* had at least 10 years of in-the-field experience, and leaders in *Parenting Together* on average had 15 years of experience.
- Evidence-based programs effectively train staff by providing information about the curriculum (such as its overall goals and its organization), helping staff become more familiar with the curriculum (for example, learning new material), and giving staff time to learn and practice new teaching strategies and skills (such as group discussion or role playing).
- Ongoing training after the program has begun provides staff members with opportunities to gain feedback about their leadership styles and to discuss problems that have arisen in working with fathers.^{viii} Ongoing coaching and support also allow staff members to share tactics and strategies that have been particularly effective in their work with fathers.^{ix} For example, *Parenting Together* offered follow-up sessions to allow staff to brush up on skills and discuss problems. These follow-up sessions provide extra support “in the field” that can help to improve teaching quality.
- Staff training in effective programs has ranged from one-day sessions, such as in the *Parenting Together* program, to three-day sessions, such as in the *Preparing for the Drug Free Years* program.

What Works Strategy #3: Have a high staff-participant ratio.

In order to minimize case load and increase a program’s effects, the number of staff members (compared to the number of participants) should be as large as possible. Having a high staff-to-participant ratio appears to increase a program’s effects.

- Some effective programs, such as *Video Self-Modeling Effects of Parenting Education on First-Time Fathers’ Skills*, have had staff work individually with fathers. Other programs have a lower staff-participant ratio. For example, *Young Dads* had about 2 staff members for every 15 participants.
- Programs with high staff-participant ratios tend to have lower attrition rates.

What Works Strategy #4: Target curricula and set clear goals to be achieved by the program.

Program curricula designed around fewer core issues seemed to lead to better outcomes than curricula that covered a large range of issues.

- Fathers often face a number of barriers that interfere with their parenting, including poor relationships with their children’s mother(s), a lack of positive parenting skills, legal issues, unemployment, financial difficulties, and low levels of education. However, instead of attempting to address *all* of these issues, programs should identify the specific goals to be achieved – whether the goals include improving employability, co-parenting interactions, father involvement with children, or communication and conflict resolution skills.
- Some of the most effective curricula have focused on a smaller, rather than a larger, number of issues. For example, the *PEACE Program* had a very narrow scope and focused only on post-divorce relationships. This resulted in positive effects on the targeted outcomes.^x
- Identifying specific goals will not only help staff understand which fathers should be recruited into the program but will help fathers understand how the program relates to their own lives – which makes men more likely to participate.^{xi}

What Works Strategy #5: Use theory-based approaches that have been effective in influencing parenting behaviors in other contexts.

Several effective fatherhood programs have developed curricula using theories of change (i.e., what the underlying assumptions are about how a specific intervention will lead to positive changes in a program’s target population) and existing research on the causes of the problem (or problems) that a program hopes to address. A theoretical understanding of the main problems allows a program to develop activities that can address these issues.

- Effective programs have frequently constructed logic models (which show how the different elements of a program relate to the intended results),^{xii} which can be especially helpful in designing activities that are expected to achieve a program’s desired outcomes based on previous research findings and theories of change.
- For example, *Preparing for the Drug Free Years*, which worked with parents to prevent and reduce their children’s substance use, is based upon a social development model that emphasizes the importance of positive bonds in preventing substance use and adolescent risk behaviors. Based on that research, a curriculum designed to address the risks for substance use and to promote characteristics that prevent substance use was developed.^{xiii}

What Works Strategy #6: Employ a variety of teaching methods designed to focus on fathers as individuals and, in doing so, personalize the information.

Most effective programs have incorporated flexibility into their service delivery, which allows programs to tailor the curriculum and services to meet the specific needs of individual fathers.

- For example, some programs (such as *Young Dads*) include individualized case management techniques, which allow staff to identify each father’s specific needs. These case management services are usually offered in addition to core sessions on parenting.
- The use of small group sessions provides fathers with the opportunity to learn parenting techniques and discuss common concerns with other fathers. In programs such as *Dads for Life*, men reported that such interactions are especially beneficial.
- Specific teaching methods may also need to be adapted depending on participant characteristics such as age, relationship status, and ethnicity.^{xiv} Some fathers may feel comfortable in a classroom-type setting as opposed to one that relies heavily upon other teaching methods, such as role playing.
 - For example, when working with Samoan and Hispanic populations, organizations using the *Preparing for the Drug Free Years* curriculum have found it effective to devote additional time to large group discussion, to reduce the time devoted to individual role playing, and to refrain from using videotapes as an instructional tool.^{xv}

What Works Strategy #7: Allow sufficient time to complete important core program activities.

Recruiting and engaging fathers for a program that is intended to change their behavior takes a considerable amount of time. Effective fatherhood programs are generally at least several weeks to several months long.

- Recruiting fathers into a program can be time consuming. Especially if a program includes group sessions, it cannot begin until enough fathers for a group enroll. As a result, several weeks or longer may elapse between when fathers first enroll and when activities begin.
 - Case management or one-on-one counseling might begin when fathers join the program, but even programs with these activities will not recruit their target number of participants all at once.
- Fathers’ knowledge and behavior do not change overnight. Having a longer program allows fathers to grasp, apply, and reinforce the skills being taught in the program.
 - For example, fathers will have time to practice communication skills with their children and partners. It also provides fathers with time to take advantage of opportunities offered by the program, such as going on job interviews.

- Fathers will also have time to discuss these experiences with program staff and other fathers in order to further improve their abilities.
- Programs lasting at least two months, such as *Effects of a Parent Education/Play Program*, generally had more positive overall findings. Other effective programs also took place over a several weeks or months: *Preparing for the Drug Free Years* lasted for five to 10 sessions over several weeks, and *Video Self-Modeling Effects of Parenting Education on First-Time Fathers’ Skills* lasted for several months.

What Works Strategy #8: Have staff who engage in one-on-one relationships with fathers.

Successful programs often had one-on-one relationships between staff and fathers. Programs that are able to engage fathers beyond just discussion of materials covered in program sessions are more likely to be effective. Individualized counseling or case management that identifies father’s specific needs may help them thrive and achieve better outcomes.

- One-on-one interactions allow staff to engage fathers beyond the discussion of material that takes place in group sessions.
 - Staff can better identify fathers’ individual needs, provide relevant referrals, address problems that men are reluctant to discuss in group sessions, and work with fathers to apply skills and concepts taught in group sessions.
- Fathers who have one-on-one interactions with staff may also build a closer, more trusting relationship with staff and may be even more open to referrals and suggestions made by staff.
- For example, the *Video Self-Modeling Effects of Parenting Education on First-Time Fathers’ Skills* program, which was found to improve men’s sensitivity towards their infants, included one-on-one interactions between participants and program staff. During these interactions, staff worked with fathers to identify issues that arose in men’s own interactions with their children and ways in which men could adapt their behavior.

What Works Strategy #9: Provide incentives to engage fathers and families.

Men often face barriers (such as work and family responsibilities) to participating in programs, and fathers often have lower attendance than mothers at parenting programs. Incentives may help fathers overcome these barriers and remain involved in the program over time.

- Modest financial incentives for participating in a program evaluation may increase men’s participation rates. *Dads for Life* offered fathers a \$20.00 incentive to participate in their evaluation.^{xvi}
- In other programs, participants earn money for diapers, clothes, and toys by attending program events.^{xvii} Some programs have also conducted raffles for attendees.^{xviii}

- Stipends may be especially effective in programs designed to increase fathers' employment skills because fathers in these programs may be in immediate need of additional income.^{xix}
- Programs can also use a variety of non-financial incentives to encourage participation. These might include child care, transportation or transportation vouchers, and food.

What Works Strategy #10: Replicate curricula with fidelity.

After selecting a program model or curriculum to be used, stray from it as little as possible. All programs that were found to be effective replicated their program models using the specified set of activities designed to put into practice the program model, intervention, or curriculum as created by the developer.

- Because various components of a program model may contribute to positive outcomes, deviating heavily from an effective model may reduce its impact on participants. Of course, some variations are likely (or even necessary), but these changes should be relatively minor and should not involve essential components of the original model. For example, a program model that has always been used with both parents and includes individual counseling should not be used with a father-only program that is conducted in group sessions.
- However, minor changes sometimes serve to enhance the program model. For example, *Preparing for the Drug Free Years* has been run in slightly different ways: instead of always being offered in five 2-hour sessions, it has sometimes been offered in 10 1-hour sessions. At other times, the program has offered additional sessions beyond the suggested 10 hours of instruction in order to allow for more practice and discussion. Even with these minor adjustments, programs using this curriculum consistently used group sessions and covered the same content.^{xx}

Conclusion

Because the responsible fatherhood movement is relatively new, research on fatherhood programs is currently limited and only a handful of experimentally evaluated programs currently exist. While future evaluations will provide us with additional knowledge about promising strategies in working with fathers, the strategies presented here are taken from this small pool of effective programs. It is important to note that the strategies presented above are suggestions, based upon existing research. We cannot say which combinations of these strategies will work. For those programs that have been shown to “work” and are considered model programs, a more detailed report is available at www.fatherhood.gov.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAMS

MODEL FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS:

Dads for Life worked with recently divorced noncustodial fathers to improve the father-child relationship and reduce mother-father conflict.

- Cookston, J. T., Braver, S. L., Griffin, W. A., Deluse, S. R., & Miles, J. C. (2006). Effects of the dads for life intervention on interparental conflict and coparenting in the two years after divorce. *Family Process*, 46(1), 123-137.

Family Transition Program worked with low-income families receiving public assistance to improve parenting during the transition to self-sufficiency.

- Bloom, D., Kemple, J. J., Morris, P., Scrivener, S., Verma, N., Hendra, R., Adams-Ciardullo, D., Seith, D., & Walter, J. (2000). *The Family Transition Program: Final report on Florida's initial time-limited welfare program*. Retrieved April 18, 2007 from: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/20/overview.html>.

Parents' Education About Children's Emotions (PEACE) Program worked with parents who were engaged in divorce proceedings to encourage positive interactions between parents.

- McKenry, P.C., Clark, K.A., & Stone, G. (1999). Evaluation of a parent education program for divorcing parents. *Family Relations*, 48(2), 129-137.

Parenting Together worked with first-time expectant parents to increase father involvement and mother-father cooperation.

- Doherty, W.J., Erickson, M. F., LaRossa, R. (2006). An intervention to increase father involvement and skills with infants during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Psychology*, 20(3), 438-447.

Preparing for the Drug Free Years worked with parents to prevent their children's drug use.

- Haggerty, K., Kosterman, R., Catalano, R. F., & Hawkins, J. D. (1999). *Preparing for the Drug Free Years*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved December 19, 2007 from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/173408.pdf>.

Responsible Fatherhood Program for Incarcerated Dads – Fairfax County worked with incarcerated fathers to provide information about child development and to improve the father-child relationship. Bavolek, S. J., Kline, D., & McLaughlin, J. (1979). Primary prevention of child abuse: Identification of high risk adolescents. *Child Abuse and Neglect: International Journal*, 3, 1070-1080.

- Robbers, Monica L. P. (2005). Focus on family and fatherhood: Lessons from Fairfax County's Responsible Fatherhood Program for Incarcerated Dads. *Justice Policy Journal*, 2(1).

Video Self-Modeling Effects of Parenting Education on First-Time Fathers' Skills worked with first-time fathers to improve parents' interactions with infants.

- Johnston, C., & Mash E. J. (1989). A measure of parenting satisfaction and efficacy. *A Journal of Clinical and Child Psychology*, 18, 167-175.
- Magill-Evans, J., Harrison, M. J., Benzies, K., Gierl, M., & Kimak, C. (2007). Effects of parenting education on first-time father's skills in interactions with their infants. *Fathering*, 5(1), 42-57.
- Sumner, G., & Speitz A. (Eds.) (1994) NCAST: *Caregiver/Parent-Child Interaction Teaching Manual*. Seattle, WA: NCAST Publications.

Young Dads worked with African American adolescent fathers to help them become more responsible fathers.

- Mazza, C. (2002). Young dads: The effects of a parenting program on urban African American adolescent fathers. *Adolescence*, 37(148), 681-693.

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