

STRENGTHENING COPARENTING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG LOW-INCOME, UNMARRIED PARENTS

To help unmarried parents improve their coparenting relationship, this National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) spotlight on research provides a quick look at findings from a recent journal article, “*Harder Being Without the Baby*”: *Fathers’ Coparenting Perspectives in Responsible Fatherhood Programming* (Randles, 2020).

The research drew on interviews and focus groups conducted with 64 low-income fathers who participated in a federally funded responsible fatherhood program in California. The program is referred to as “DADS” in the article and in this spotlight.

The spotlight also draws on key findings from two Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation reports (Avellar et al, 2019 and Friend et al, 2016) and a meta-analysis of responsible fatherhood programs (Holmes et al, 2020).

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS²

1. The effect responsible fatherhood programs have on supporting fathers’ coparenting relationships has been mixed, but more examples and promising findings are emerging (Holmes et al, 2020; Avellar et al, 2019; Friend et al, 2016).
2. Fathers in the DADS program reported a wide range of coparenting relationships, from highly cooperative to completely disengaged.
3. Fathers shared examples of how the DADS program helped them navigate the interrelated strains of poverty, family complexity, and coparenting challenges.
4. Fathers in the DADS program reflected positively on the peer group discussions and ongoing staff support they received, including how this helped enhance their communication and conflict-resolution skills to support effective coparenting.
5. More research is needed to include mothers’ perspectives and to determine whether participation in responsible fatherhood programs can lead to long-term coparenting improvements for families.

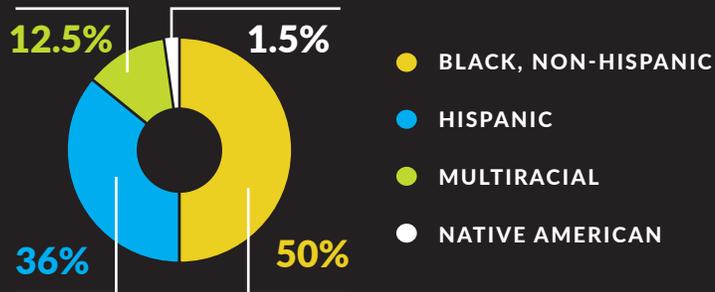


¹Jennifer Randles, California State University, wrote the text for this Spotlight. Suggested citation: Randles, J. (2020). Strengthening Coparenting Relationships among Low-Income, Unmarried Parents. [Spotlight on Research.] National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. [LINK TO BE ADDED]

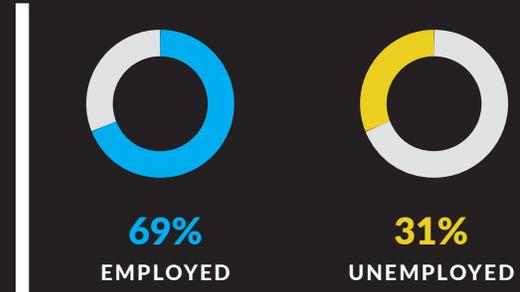
²Unless otherwise noted, all findings reported in this section of the Spotlight refer to the DADS program.

“DADS” PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS – AT POINT OF PROGRAM ENTRY

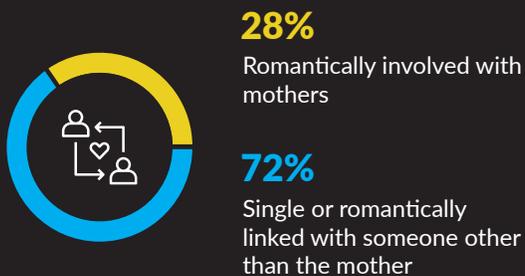
Ethnicity



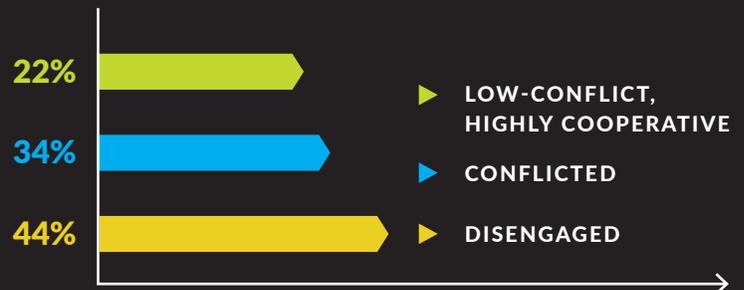
Employment Status



Relationship Status



Coparenting Relationship Quality (Self-Reported)



KEY COPARENTING THEMES³

- A.** Some fathers reported frequent “maternal gatekeeping” behaviors that limited the time they spent with their children. For example, from participants in the DADS program:
- “She uses my kids to get to me. She changed her number and moved out of the apartment.”
 - “She’d say, ‘You’re only going to see the kids if you give me gas so I can get to work tomorrow.’”
- B.** Most fathers did not have legal joint custody or visitation arrangements, but thought pursuing legal custody would be a last resort to gaining access to their children.
- C.** In the DADS program research, fathers talked about their feelings for their children’s mothers as coparents, not as romantic partners.
- Half of the fathers believed that focusing on complicated romantic relationships with mothers distracted them from involvement with their children.
- D.** Fathers indicated that parenting and relationship education delivered in fatherhood peer group settings was especially helpful for navigating coparenting challenges.
- E.** A significant proportion of fathers reported:
- Improved coparenting relationships.
 - Fewer arguments and more communication with their coparents.
 - Increased contact with their children.
- F.** Fathers in the DADS program reported that the employment and education services:
- Helped them financially.
 - Improved their qualifications and skills.
 - Helped their coparents begin to see them as more capable and reliable even though they still had financial challenges.
- G.** Many of the fathers in the DADS program described how the skills they learned in the program helped them negotiate with their coparents for more time with their children.
- They also valued receiving program incentives, such as food and diapers, which helped them avoid showing up empty-handed for visitation.



³ Unless otherwise noted, results in this section come from DADS and PACT.



Recommendations for practice: Drawing on findings from the DADS program

1. Although fathers often report maternal gatekeeping as an obstacle to spending time with their children, few fathers in the DADS program described their coparenting relationships as irreparable. In fact, most said they shared a commitment to their children and held respect for mothers' parenting abilities.



RECOMMENDATION: To build on these shared commitments, responsible fatherhood programs could involve mothers in conversations or occasional program activities and explore potential avenues to maternal “gate opening.”

2. Fathers in the DADS program prioritized relationships with their children over marriage or dating relationships with their children's mothers. The type of support fathers most wanted from the program was help with increasing contact with their children, making joint parenting decisions with mothers, and negotiating coparenting challenges caused by financial constraints.



RECOMMENDATION: Responsible fatherhood programs should prioritize a child-centered, rather than couples-focused, approach in program curricula and services.

3. The interrelated strains of poverty and family complexity often undermine the ability of fathers to be fully involved with their children. Fathers in the DADS program reported that they especially appreciated services, such as employment and education, which allowed them to overcome some of these complexities and demonstrate their parenting commitments to their coparents.



RECOMMENDATION: Responsible fatherhood programs should show how their program services help fathers improve their educational credentials, job skills, and employment prospects. Publicizing this information in the community—and sharing it with mothers—could reframe mothers' perceptions of marginalized men as capable and dedicated coparents.

REFERENCES:

- Avellar, S., Covington, R., Moore, Q., Patnaik, A., & Wu, A. (2019). *Effects of four responsible fatherhood programs for low-income fathers: Evidence from the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.
<https://bit.ly/3cu5iyO>
- Friend, D., Max, J., Holcomb, P., Edin, K., & Dion, R. (2016). *Fathers' views of co-parenting relationships: Findings from the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.
<https://bit.ly/2Y9K2IK>
- Holmes, E. K., Egginton, B. M., Hawkins, A. J., Robbins, N. L., & Shafer, K. (2020). Do responsible fatherhood programs work? A comprehensive meta-analytic study. *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science*.
<https://bit.ly/2Y8JaE8>
- Randles, J. (2020). "Harder being without the baby": Fathers' coparenting perspectives in responsible fatherhood programming. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.
<https://bit.ly/2PXFdxB>

ADDITIONAL HELPFUL RESOURCES:

- Perry, A., Rollins, A., & Perez, A. (2020). *Fatherhood and coparenting*. Fatherhood Research and Practice Network.
<https://bit.ly/2z9View>
 - This report is based on a pilot project with coparenting partners of fathers who participated in the 4 Your Child responsible fatherhood project in Louisville, Kentucky.
 - For a brief summary of the report, see *NFRC Spotlight on Research: Fatherhood and coparenting* (2020):
<https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/nfrc-spotlight-research-fatherhood-and-co-parenting>

