

Enhancing Parenting Skills of Low-Income Fathers Through Fatherhood Group Meetings

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Parents as Teachers™

Introduction

Fathers interact with their children in ways different from mothers, contributing equally and importantly to children's healthy and optimal development (Turner, 2009). Nevertheless, according to the U.S Census Bureau report (Kreider, 2008), the percentage of father-absent homes continues to rise nationally, with 1 out of every 3 of America's children (34.5 percent) living apart from their biological fathers.

There are also cultural and societal barriers that associate taking care of children with female roles. Fathers consequently have been found to show less interest in participating in parent education programs and other efforts that support parents to become the first and the best teachers of their children (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 2006). Home visiting programs are no exception.

Funded by a Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Federal Grant, the current project was initiated at multiple sites across the country to increase father participation in Parents as Teachers and increase fathers' knowledge of child development, enhance fathers' parenting skills, and encourage fathers to become more engaged and influential in their children's everyday lives.

The project involved organizing and offering a series of 12 fatherhood group meetings to low-income fathers whose families are already enrolled in a local site of the parent education and family support program, and hence already receive monthly home visits.

Method

Questions:

- > How successful have the fatherhood group meeting sessions been in recruiting fathers to participate in home visits?
- > How have the fatherhood group meetings and the home visits, together, impacted low-income fathers' parenting skills and knowledge?

Participants: 175 low-income resident fathers (ages 15 to 58, mean age =31) who live with their children ages prenatal to kindergarten entry were served with at least eight hours of skill-based parenting education through fatherhood group meetings. The series of 12 meetings was typically held weekly. Services were provided at seven sites across the United States.

Data collection: Fathers completed a brief demographic survey as well as open-ended questions about their expectations for the group meetings at the beginning of the group meeting sessions and changes they experienced as a result of the group meetings.

In addition, 58 fathers completed the [Protective Factors Survey](#) at the beginning and the end of a 12-session group meeting series (pre-test and post-test). The Protective Factors Survey is a valid and reliable outcomes tool developed by the FRIENDS National Center in collaboration with University of Kansas. The partner sites also reported on their challenges and lessons learned.

**Table 1: Participant characteristics**

Marital status		Ethnicity/race		Educational level	
Married	55%	White	50%	Some high school	16%
Single	21%	Black	30%	HS diploma/GED	39%
Divorced	5%	Hispanic/Latino	13%	Trade/vocational	5%
Separated	2%	More than two races	1%	Some college	18%
Living with partner	16%			2-year college	11%
Widower	1%	Other	7%	4-year college +	12%

Results and analysis

How successful have the fatherhood group meetings been in recruiting fathers to participate in home visits?

The results suggest that the fatherhood group meetings were successful in engaging fathers in home visits. More fathers, after joining the fatherhood group, became actively involved in the monthly home visits. While 30 percent of the families served by Parents as Teachers programs nationwide reported that fathers participated in at least one home visit during the 2008-2009 program year, 62 percent of the fathers in the current project participated in at least one home visit. These fathers participated in an average of 3.23 visits during a 12-session fatherhood group meeting series.

How have the fatherhood group meetings and the home visits, together, impacted low-income fathers' parenting skills and knowledge?

First, father participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions were analyzed and coded. In the beginning, fathers had broad goals of becoming "better fathers," followed by improving parenting skills and knowledge and making friends/interacting and sharing thoughts with other fathers. By the end, substantially more fathers reported improving their communication/relationships with their children and spouse, becoming more patient, and helping their children learn (see Table 2).

Chi-square was performed on primary responses of 47 fathers, coded into six categories (better father, improved parenting, improved communication, self-care/self-development, patience, and other). The result showed that the fathers' expressed goals before and after the intervention differed significantly at $X^2(5)=83.31, p<.005$. The results are also supported by anecdotes from the group facilitators from partner sites.



**Table 2: All fathers' open-ended responses**

What would like to achieve from attending this group?							
Be a better dad	Improve parenting skills/gain knowledge	Improve communication/relationships with child or spouse	Make friends/interact with other fathers/share thoughts	Self-care/self development			Other
49%	33%	9%	21%	15%			4%
What changes have you made in your personal life or family life as a result of attending fatherhood group meetings?							
Be a better dad	Improve parenting skills/gain knowledge	Improve communication/relationships with child or spouse	Make friends/interact with other fathers/share thoughts	Self-care/self development	Patience with children/others	Learning	Other
12%	30%	46%	2%	17%	19%	9%	3%

Second, pre-post scores from the Protective Factors Survey collected from 58 fathers were analyzed using paired t-tests. Positive changes were detected in four areas: family functioning/resiliency ($t(57)=-3.47, p=.001$), concrete support ($t(57)=-2.509, p=.015$), nurturing and attachment ($t(56)=-3.245, p=.002$), and one of the child development/knowledge of parenting items (#13 "I know how to help my child learn," $t(57)=-3.715, p<.001$).



What fathers say changed . . . “More patience, explaining more. A better understanding of behaviors from kids. To see signs of anger or frustration and know when to step away or take a deep breath.” – Father participant

“Teaching through play. Setting a routine with my child makes it a lot easier” – Father participant

“Today I am sober. Today I feel more equip (sic) to be a dad and father. Today I am motivated.” – Father participant

“My everyday life is more open. I notice my kids more and more.” – Father participant

What facilitators say changed . . . “Their new understanding of age appropriate behavior regarding their children. . . We have also observed that many of the fathers have found their parenting styles to be too authoritarian and that it is not developmentally appropriate to view their children as ‘mini soldiers.’” – J. Buehrle and T. Lewis (Dads on Duty), CA

“The fathers shared knowledge they probably wouldn’t have shared anywhere else. Some fathers shared more of a bond from going through this training.” – M. Smith, PA

“The most observed change . . . has been [that dads are] more involved in the everyday lives of the children.” – B. Irion, IL

Challenges and lessons learned

The challenges partner sites reported fall into two major categories:

Recruitment

- > Collaborating with community; getting buy-in from agency staff
- > Getting the fathers through the door

Engagement and retention

- > Scheduling issues (e.g., sick child, overtime work, prior engagement)
- > Special populations (e.g., language issues, military fathers/deployment, incarceration)



“The biggest recruitment challenge is probably just to get dads to show up to the first group. Every dad that showed up to an actual group has come back.”
– T. Vestal, MO

“The challenge is to persuade men that the center is not just for women and children...”
– A. Johnson, PA

“Get everyone within your agency to buy into the dads’ program. Form partnerships and relationships because this will help with recruitment. If given the chance most of these dads want to become better fathers, better men and better husbands.” – F. Velasquez, WA

Conclusions

Low-income fathers who participated in at least eight hours of skill-based parenting education through fatherhood group meetings had higher participation rates in home visits and reported improved skills and knowledge of parenting, enhanced communication/relationships with children, and improved patience and understanding of age-appropriate behaviors. In addition, fathers showed increases in family functioning/ resiliency, concrete support, nurturing and attachment, and one measure of child development/knowledge of parenting, as measured by the Protective Factors Survey.

These findings suggest that providing a combination of father-focused group meetings along with home visits can increase fathers’ positive involvement in their children’s lives.

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