Implementing Parent Education in Fatherhood Programs: Putting Lessons from Research into Practice

Developed by Mathematica Policy Research on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

Overview

This brief suggests ways that findings from research on parent education programs can inform fatherhood programs. It summarizes the research on two promising service delivery components (modeling and opportunities for parents to practice skills with their children), describes the two components, provides suggestions for implementing them in fatherhood programs, highlights examples from a small number of programs and curricula that include these components, and provides suggestions for overcoming implementation challenges.

Introduction

Fatherhood programs typically focus on helping fathers play a positive role in the lives of their children, which includes the provision of emotional and material support. Programs typically aim to achieve these objectives by teaching parenting and co-parenting skills and providing assistance to help fathers improve their economic stability. A recent systematic review of research on responsible fatherhood and other family-strengthening programs found that programs primarily delivered parent education through curriculum-based group sessions.[1] These programs provided information or taught skills to improve father-child interaction, including appropriate discipline, play skills, encouragement of children's self-expression, and knowledge of child development. Fewer programs offered father-child activities (9 of the 70 programs included in the review) or home visiting (6 of the 70 programs).

Existing research provides limited information on the effects of fatherhood programs on outcomes for fathers and their families (Avellar et al., 2011; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007). The systematic review referenced above identified 15 impact studies that were well designed for detecting whether the program was effective (Avellar et al., 2011). However, the findings from these studies showed mixed results. For example, studies of fatherhood programs that focused on parenting showed limited favorable impacts on parenting behaviors but some promising effects on parenting knowledge and attitudes. Additional research on program effectiveness is needed to provide more information to fatherhood program practitioners on what works to support low-income fathers and their children.

To increase the likelihood that fatherhood programs will achieve desired objectives, it may be useful to consider lessons from research on parent education programs. Two recent research studies have shown that certain components of parent education programs may help parents acquire parenting skills and behaviors and improve outcomes for children (Grindal et al., 2013; Kaminski et al., 2008). Although these studies looked primarily at work with mothers, their findings may also be applicable for fathers. Both studies were conducted using a method called meta-analysis, which allows researchers to simultaneously look at multiple evaluations of parent education programs and draw conclusions about the

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[1] The Strengthening Families Evidence Review summarized and assessed 90 studies of 70 programs for low-income fathers (Avellar et al. 2011).

components of the programs that were associated with better outcomes for children and parents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). Rather than assessing specific parent education programs, the researchers identified content and program delivery components used across programs and examined whether they had evidence of success in producing desired results. They concluded that two of the program delivery components had the potential to improve outcomes for parents and children: (1) modeling that demonstrates effective parenting skills; and (2) opportunities for parents to practice skills in the program with their children (Grindal et al., 2013; Kaminski et al., 2008). This brief focuses on these two components.

What Is Meta-Analysis?

Meta-analysis is the use of statistical methods to combine results of individual studies. This technique allows researchers to look across evaluations and identify patterns among study results, sources of disagreement among those results, or other interesting relationships that may come to light in the context of multiple studies.

To conduct a meta-analysis, researchers develop the research questions they want to answer; define the interventions they are interested in studying, such as the types of programs, the characteristics of the population they serve, and their intended outcomes; set parameters for including research in the review, such as the study designs, types of publications, years when studies were published, and the outcomes studied; conduct an exhaustive search for relevant studies; code aspects of the studies they are interested in examining; and then apply statistical methods to combine results of the individual studies. The results are reported as effect sizes. An effect size is a measure that describes the magnitude of the difference between two groups, ideally a group receiving the program in question and a group not receiving that program. Ultimately, a meta-analysis gives a thorough summary of several studies that have been done on the same topic, and provides researchers with information on whether an effect exists and the size of that effect.

The purpose of this brief is to suggest ways that findings from research on parent education programs can inform fatherhood programs. The brief summarizes the research on the two promising service delivery components, describes the two components, and provides suggestions for implementing them in fatherhood programs. In addition, we highlight a small number of programs and curricula to provide "real life" examples of incorporating these components into fatherhood programs. It is important to note that the recommendations in this brief are drawn from research on parent education programs that primarily involved mothers. Although we cannot say that these strategies will lead to the same outcomes in fatherhood programs, the information can be used as suggestions for fatherhood program practitioners interested in integrating components associated with successful outcomes.

Findings from Research on Parent Education

In this section we describe the methods and findings from two meta-analyses. In one meta-analysis, researchers included 77 studies of training programs for parents of children from birth to age 7 years (Kaminski et al., 2008; CDC, 2009). To be included in the review, the studies had to include a comparison group and be published in English in a peer-reviewed journal between 1990 and 2002. The review focused on parent education programs that targeted the prevention and/or remediation of early childhood problem behaviors. Only studies of parent training programs in which parents actively work on parenting skills through mechanisms such as homework, modeling, or practice skills were included in the review. Researchers coded the studies to indicate whether the programs evaluated included specific program content such as child development knowledge and care, positive interactions with child, emotional communication, or discipline and behavior management, and program delivery components such as modeling, homework, role playing, and practice with own child. The meta-analysis found the following:

- Three components (teaching parents emotional communication skills, teaching parents positive parent-child interaction skills, and requiring parents to practice with their children during program sessions) were more likely to be found in programs that were effective at increasing parenting skills and behaviors.

- Four components (teaching parents the correct use of time out, teaching parents how to respond consistently to their children, teaching parents to interact positively with their children, and requiring parents to practice with their children during program sessions) were more likely to be found in programs that showed greater improvements in children's aggressive, noncompliant, or hyperactive behavior.

In the other meta-analysis, researchers looked at 121 studies of early childhood education programs for children from birth to age 5 that included a parent education component (Grindal et al., 2013; Grindal, 2014). To be included in the review, the studies had to have been conducted in the United States and published between 1960 and 2007. Studies had to include a comparison group, have at least 10 participants in each group, and have less than 50 percent of the study participants drop out. Researchers grouped the studies into two categories: (1) studies of programs that provided parents with information (such as general parenting information classes or didactic information about parent-child activities) or encouraged participation in the early childhood education program; and (2) studies of programs that offered parent education that included modeling and provided opportunities for parents to practice developmentally appropriate adult-child interactions. The meta-analysis found that:

- Parent education programs that included modeling and opportunities for parents to practice skills with their children were related to better pre-academic skills among children (including numeracy skills and letter-word recognition) than programs without these components.

Nevertheless, the following limitations and contextual factors are important to consider when interpreting these findings:

- Results from meta-analysis describe correlation rather than causation. This means that the findings from a meta-analysis can suggest relationships between two or more things (in this case, between program delivery components of parent education programs and outcomes for children and families), but they cannot say one caused the other (Walker et al., 2008).
- The programs included in the meta-analyses targeted families with young children (up to age 7 in one study and age 5 in the other).
- Most of the programs in the meta-analyses were targeted to mothers (although some of the studies did include programs for fathers or for both fathers and mothers).
- The findings were relevant within the context of specific types of programs. Findings from the first meta-analysis relate to studies of parent education programs that used active learning and targeted the prevention and/or remediation of early childhood problem behaviors (Kaminski et al., 2008). Findings from the second meta-analysis relate to studies of parent education programs that were offered in addition to early childhood education programs (Grindal et al., 2013).

Modeling and Practicing

Both meta-analyses found two program components to be associated with better outcomes: (1) modeling that demonstrates effective parenting skills; and (2) opportunities for parents to practice skills in the program with their children. The next section will describe what exactly those two program components are and what they might look like in the field.

What Is "Modeling"?

Modeling refers to demonstrations of parenting behaviors by trained parent educators or other trained individuals (Kaminski et al., 2008; CDC, 2009; Grindal et al., 2013). In the case of parent education programs, modeling might take the following forms:

- **Demonstration with a child.** A parent educator demonstrates to a parent how to address a problem behavior or engage a child in a play activity with the child present. For example, a parent educator might encourage a toddler to stack, count, and identify the colors of blocks. While engaging with the child, the educator would explain to the parent how each activity encourages learning and model for the parent how to show enthusiasm and provide positive attention for successes.

- **Demonstration without a child.** A parent educator demonstrates to a parent how to address a problem behavior or engage a child in a play activity without the child present. If the child is not present, the parent educator might show the parent ways to use blocks with his or her child to practice stacking, counting, and identifying colors. The educator would explain to the parent how each activity encourages learning and how the parent should show enthusiasm and provide positive attention for successes when engaging with his or her child.

- **Direct observation.** A parent educator and a parent observe a child interacting with a teacher or other trained caregiver and describe what the individual is doing and why. In this example of modeling, a parent educator and a parent might observe the toddler with a caregiver. As the caregiver encourages the child to stack, count, and identify the colors of blocks, the parent educator would describe to the parent what the caregiver is doing and why.

- **Video observation.** A parent educator shows a group of parents a video of a child interacting with a teacher or other trained individual. For example, the parents might watch a video of a caregiver engaging in block play with a toddler. While watching the video, the parent educator would engage the parents in a discussion about what the caregiver is doing and why.

What Is "Practicing"?

Practicing is described in the literature as in-session opportunities for a parent to practice skills with his or her own child (Kaminski et al., 2008; CDC, 2009; Grindal et al., 2013). In the case of parent education programs, a parent educator might demonstrate to a parent how to address a problem behavior or engage a child in a play activity, and then allow the parent to practice the skill with his or her own child. Building on the examples provided above, a parent educator might provide information to a parent about multiple activities he or she can engage in with a set of blocks. The parent educator might provide the information only or might model for the parent ways to use the blocks with his or her child to practice stacking, counting, and identifying colors. In either case, the educator would explain to the parent how the activities encourage learning and how the parent can show enthusiasm and provide positive attention for successes. The parent would then try out the new skills with his or her child. While the parent is practicing with the child, or afterwards, the educator might provide feedback to the parent about the interaction.

Implications for Fatherhood Programs and Examples from the Field

In this section, we provide some suggestions and examples of how fatherhood practitioners might use modeling and practicing approaches to enhance the provision of parent education for fathers. These examples, while drawn from established program work with fathers, are illustrative only and are not meant to be representative of all fatherhood programs. The examples are based on the work of two specific fatherhood programs with a long experience of providing parent education for fathers (the *Dads Make a Difference* program of Healthy Families San Angelo in San Angelo, Texas and the *FATHER Project* of Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota) and three program curricula that have been widely used by fatherhood programs in the United States and other countries (*Nurturing Fathers*, *Boot Camp for New Dads*, and *Conscious Fathering*). Additional information about these programs and curricula is included in a summary box at the end of the brief.

Provide regular sessions involving fathers and their children, with a focus on modeling and practice of skills.

Sessions with fathers and their children can be held during group activities, such as play groups and special group sessions, or during home visits. For example, the *Dads Make a Difference* program, which serves families with children

from birth to age 3, uses evening playgroups to demonstrate healthy father-child interaction and developmentally appropriate activities that fathers can do with their young children. Similarly, in collaboration with Minneapolis Early Childhood Education, the *FATHER Project* holds weekly skills-based interactive sessions for fathers and their children (from birth to age 5). The sessions begin with activities for the fathers and children together. Fathers then participate in a discussion led by a licensed parent educator focused on child development, school readiness, temperament, and guiding behavior, while children participate in developmentally appropriate activities. The sessions are held onsite at the fatherhood project.

Programs that use the Nurturing Fathers curriculum provide an opportunity for fathers to participate in structured activities with their children during week 8 (*Playshop: Fun and Games for Fathers and Their Children*) of the 13-week curriculum. During the activities, program facilitators observe the fathers interacting with their own children and the other children at the event. Facilitators model behaviors and skills with the fathers, such as rewarding children's efforts and leading with encouragement, and offer feedback and suggestions to fathers both at the event and during the next group session.

Other programs work with fathers and their children during home visits. For example, *Dads Make a Difference* offers home visits for fathers alone and mothers and fathers together. The program developed their own *Maps for Dads* curriculum to guide home visits, provide information about child development, and facilitate father-child activities designed to encourage appropriate stimulation, basic care skills, and child safety.

Use father and child activities/outings as opportunities for modeling and practicing skills.

Events can be structured to allow parent educators to work one-on-one with fathers and their children to model parenting behaviors and skills. In turn, these events can also give fathers opportunities to practice the skills with their children. For example, the *FATHER Project* hosts monthly father-child interactive events (e.g., barbeques, picnics, kick ball games, and canoe trips), which are primarily designed as opportunities for fathers to connect with and have fun with their children. The events also present opportunities for staff to observe fathers interacting with their children, focusing on how fathers are implementing the parenting behaviors discussed during the 12-week parent education program. Staff members use the information to provide feedback to the fathers and to inform discussion topics for upcoming trainings.

Give expectant fathers an opportunity to practice parenting skills prior to the birth of their first child.

The *Boot Camp for New Dads* and *Conscious Fathering* curricula are designed as short workshops to help expectant fathers prepare for fatherhood. The three-hour *Boot Camp* workshop provides an opportunity for expectant fathers to learn from fathers who have recently had their first child. These "veteran" dads share tips on getting babies to sleep or meeting an infant's needs and discuss transitions such as when the child's mother returns to work. They are invited to bring their infants (typically between 2- and 6-months old), which provides opportunities for them to model parenting behaviors and skills as they arise, such as soothing a crying infant and changing a diaper. It also gives the expectant dads opportunities to gain hands-on experience and practice holding an infant.

In the two-hour *Conscious Fathering* workshop, expectant fathers learn how to meet a baby's needs, including how to change and diaper a baby, by practicing on a life size doll. The program includes a particular focus on preventing Shaken Baby Syndrome and empowering new fathers to work in partnership with mothers to care for and nurture their children.

Implementation Challenges and Suggestions for Addressing Them

Given the existing structure and target population of many fatherhood programs, integrating these practices may present various challenges. In this section, we identify three such challenges and suggest ways to address them.

Lack of opportunities for parent education sessions with fathers and their children together.

Practicing requires fathers and children to participate in training together, such as during a home visit or joint trainings for parents and children. Although modeling can be implemented using video recordings, typically it involves parent

educators modeling behaviors and skills with children. However, most fatherhood programs offer group sessions for fathers only and may not be able to add a home visiting or joint father-child training component. As described above, some fatherhood programs address this challenge by offering play groups, group outings, and events, and/or planning a specific session for fathers and their children.

If bringing fathers and their children together is not possible because of parental incarceration or other reasons, another option is to use technology to integrate modeling (Mbwana et al., 2009). Programs can use video clips to demonstrate developmentally appropriate play skills and positive father-child interactions. Some agencies that use the *Nurturing Fathers* curriculum have incorporated phone or video calls to provide opportunities for incarcerated fathers to practice parenting skills by playing games and reading books with their children. Other programs have worked with correctional facilities to arrange special events for incarcerated fathers and their children. For example, New Mexico State University's *Strengthening Families Initiative*, which received federal fatherhood funding from 2006 to 2011, included a "Family Day" that provided opportunities for inmates to play games and practice parenting skills with parenting partners and their children age 17 or younger (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

Working with fathers who have children of various ages, not just young children.

Commonly, fatherhood programs are not limited to fathers with children in a specific age range, but rather are offered to a broad group of fathers with children of various ages. Programs that do target fathers with children in a specific age range may also include fathers who have other children as well. Holding events for children of various ages requires careful planning to provide developmentally appropriate activities for all attendees. The *Nurturing Fathers* curriculum session, *Playshop: Fun and Games for Fathers and Their Children*, is designed for work with fathers of children from birth to age 18. Programs that use this curriculum are encouraged to actively engage fathers in planning and hosting these events. Fathers can ask older children to help host the event and lead activities for younger children. The *Dads Make a Difference* program holds evening playgroups for fathers and their children from birth to age 3 and designs activities targeted to the ages and stages of the children who attend each group.

Working with nonresidential fathers.

Planning opportunities for father-child engagement with nonresidential fathers requires programs to work with fathers to identify times and days of the week that work best for them. For some fathers, this may mean holding events or playgroups on weekends when fathers may typically see their children. Programs may also need to plan events multiple weeks in advance so fathers can discuss the event with their children's mothers to arrange to bring them. Programs that use the *Nurturing Fathers* curriculum work with the participants early in the course to identify a day of the week that works best for the group. The event may occur on a weekend even if regular group sessions are held on a weeknight. The *Dads Make a Difference* program encourages participation in *Daddy and Me* nights by advertising the events as a chance for fathers to give mothers a "night off." Since the program works with both mothers and fathers, staff members also talk directly to mothers to encourage them to give the fathers access to their children so they can attend the events.

Dads Make a Difference, Healthy Families San Angelo, San Angelo, TX

The *Dads Make a Difference* program is designed to promote fathers' emotional connection to and financial support of their children. The program targets young fathers in the San Angelo, Texas, area who enroll before or right after their children's births and are eligible to stay in the program until their children turn age 3. During home visits and group meetings with fathers solely and parents together, trained parent educators deliver the *Maps for Dads* curriculum, which covers topics such as child development, differences between mothering and fathering, child health and safety, relationship skills, and personal development. Fathers are also invited to father-child play activities, family outings, and recreational activities.

For more information visit: http://www.hfsatx.com/dadsmain.htm

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FATHER Project, Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

The *FATHER (Fostering Actions To Help Earnings and Responsibility) Project* uses a one-stop shop approach to offer coordinated services to fathers designed to help them overcome barriers that prevent them from supporting and nurturing their children. Services are offered in Minneapolis, St. Paul, St. Cloud, Rochester, and Park Rapids, Minnesota. Fathers age 17 to 40 are eligible to participate in coordinated case management that includes case managers, employment counselors, child support officers, and attorneys. All participants take part in a 12-week parent education program; the curriculum covers topics such as child development, child health and safety, and personal development. Fathers are also invited to father-child interactive sessions and monthly father-child events.

For more information visit: http://www.goodwilleasterseals.org/site/PageServer?pagename=serv_other_father

Nurturing Fathers Program

The *Nurturing Fathers Program* is a 13-week curriculum designed to teach parenting and nurturing skills to men. It is structured to provide experiences that encourage fathers to change parenting attitudes and behaviors. Topics covered during group sessions include positive discipline, effective family communication techniques, father-child interaction, personal development, and self-awareness. The *Nurturing Fathers Program* is offered in communities throughout the United States and has been implemented in a variety of settings, including schools, Head Start programs, churches, prisons, halfway houses, and parenting and counseling centers.

For more information visit: http://nurturingfathers.com

Boot Camp for New Dads

Boot Camp for New Dads is a father-to-father, community-based workshop designed to help men to become confidently engaged with their infants, support their children's mothers, and personally navigate their transformation into fatherhood. The three hour workshop is offered to men before the birth of their first child. It is led by trained facilitators (often program graduates) who are accompanied by "veteran dads". Veteran dads are fathers who recently completed the program and attend with their newborn children (typically between 2 and 6 months old) to share their experiences and provide the "rookie dads" with hands-on experience with infants. *Boot Camp for New Dads* workshops are offered in communities throughout the United States.

For more information visit: http://www.bootcampfornewdads.org

Conscious Fathering Program

The *Conscious Fathering Program* is a two hour workshop usually offered in hospitals. It is designed to provide expectant and new fathers an opportunity to learn their newborn babies' basic needs, how babies communicate, and how to meet their babies' needs. Through these learning objectives, the program also aims to help prevent Shaken Baby Syndrome. During the workshop, men learn how to meet and anticipate their babies' needs by practicing on life size dolls with real clothes and diapers. New and expectant fathers are taught the basic tools they will need to care for their infants during the first 3 months of life.

For more information visit: http://www.parenttrust.org/index.php?page=consciousfathering

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