

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Breaking the Cycle: Becoming Better Fathers through Supportive Fatherhood Programs in Texas

When fathers are actively engaged in their children's lives, their children experience improved mental, emotional, educational, and social outcomes.¹ In 2015, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' (DFPS) Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) launched the Fatherhood Educating Fathers for Empowering Children Tomorrow (EFFECT) Programs to encourage and support healthy father engagement by providing evidence-based fatherhood programs in three communities across the state. The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is evaluating the success of the EFFECT Programs through a mixed-method approach. One method to accomplish this aim is to listen to the fathers being served by the programs to learn how they benefit and what they recommend to improve the programs. This policy brief summarizes the findings from three focus groups with past and current participants in each EFFECT Programs.

The fathers we spoke with shared numerous benefits from their participation in the EFFECT Programs. They appreciated the positive influence of the program facilitators and the space to share their experiences and emotions with other fathers. There is a need for more institutional and organizational support for fathers and their specific needs, as well as more spaces and opportunities to engage with their children. The programs provide a much needed resource to fathers who are typically not well-served by social programs, and fathers claim that the bond they form with the program facilitator and the connections he provides to other community resources is as valuable to them as the program curriculum.

Reasons Fathers Participate in the Programs

Most of the fathers with whom we spoke began participating in their fatherhood program because they wanted to become better fathers. The fathers remained in the program because of the connections they developed with the program facilitator and the other fathers, and because of the new skills and hope they gained from participation.

Fathers participate initially because they want to be better fathers

The primary reason fathers cited for participating in the program was to become better fathers to their children. The fathers hoped the program would help them strengthen relationships with their children, especially with their children who do not live with them. Fathers also hoped the program would improve their relationship with their children's mother(s), or would help their custody cases. Several fathers commented that they hoped the programs would "prove" to the judge or children's mother(s) that the father is were trying to be a good father and that the judge would allow them to spend more time with their children.

"We don't want our kids to grow up the way we did... This program is going to help. It's going to change a person's attitude. Be able to give your family the respect they need. The presence of yourself. Being there."

- South Texas Father

Fathers talked about wanting to be a role model to their children and a better father to their children than their own father had been. When asked about their own fathers, they described absent fathers who were in prison or who worked all the time. They also described fathers who did not talk to their children or share their feelings with them. When the participants became fathers themselves, they were scared and overwhelmed by the experience, and they did not have resources or support to learn how to be a good father. When asked who taught them to be a "father," many men responded that they learned to be a father from the "street."

Fathers said that young fathers and first-time fathers definitely need these parenting programs. Yet, reflecting on their experiences as first-time-fathers, many commented that young fathers may not seek this kind of program or realize that they need help.

Fathers were also quite skeptical that the programs were authentic and that a free program targeted to fathers was available in their community. One father initially thought the program might be a way for the Attorney General to put fathers in jail for not paying child support. Another father thought it would be a waste of time, since most parenting classes are focused on mothers or on the couple, instead of addressing the specific needs and concerns of fathers.

Connections with facilitators and other fathers keep fathers in the program

Fathers emphasized the importance of a reliable and positive voice in their life. They explained that most of their daily interactions make them feel beaten down and discouraged. The fathers felt that the facilitators of the program really wanted to see the participants become better men and fathers. The majority of fathers commented that they felt a personal connection with the program facilitators because facilitators personalized the curriculum with experiences from their own lives as a parent.

Importantly, many fathers reported that the structure of the group discussions, which allowed each father to share his story, created a support group for fathers to feel less isolated. Fathers talked about sharing emotions and thoughts in the group that they could not share with people outside of the program. They appreciated having a supportive facilitator and supportive men to

provide positive interactions. They felt that most of their interactions at work, with other men in social settings, their families, and with organizations designed to help them were usually alienating; they often felt like the court system and the social welfare system devalued them as fathers, especially if they were not able to provide financial support to their children. Fathers also talked about the lack of fellowship with other men, and appreciated a space where they could cry and not feel judged. Most fathers did not know their classmates prior to the program, and that anonymity allowed them to be more vulnerable and share their feelings more than they would be able to among their peers.

New skills and hope also keep fathers in the programs

Fathers also reported staying in the program because they felt that, even if they already knew how to be fathers, they still learned valuable skills or gained advice on issues other fathers had experienced in the past. Fathers were glad to learn different ways to interact with their children. They also found hope that they could be good fathers and take back some control over their lives, instead of dwelling in the hopelessness they otherwise experienced in social services programs and the judicial system. Military fathers talked about how their devotion to the military ended their marriages and made it difficult to feel anything for their children. The program provided structure and guidance that helped active-military and veterans reconnect with their families. One military father said that he promoted the program to other fathers and was better equipped to identify fathers who needed these services.

Benefits of the Programs for Fathers

Fathers unanimously cited the positive impact of the program on their lives. The program provided a network of support and helped fathers make different and positive choices in their daily lives. They also learned skills to help them in their relationships with their children and with their children's mothers.

The father-facilitator relationship

Fathers spoke highly of having program facilitators who could provide a regular, positive, and supportive check-in, in comparison to the frequent negative interactions they have in their daily lives. Fathers said when they enter a court room or an organization they were treated like "dead-beat" dads. They appreciated that the facilitators would listen and respond in a supportive and understanding way to the daily issues the fathers face.

A safe place to share and connect

Fathers particularly appreciated the “only-for-dads” approach to the program. They reported feeling ostracized from government systems that catered to mothers and that excluded or devalued fathers. They appreciated having a space to share and commiserate with other fathers about their feelings and experiences, which helped them feel less isolated in the problems they were working through as fathers.

The fathers claimed that although they all had different things to say, they were able to relate to and learn from each other. Fathers described how the structure of the program, in which all the fathers would read their responses during activities, made them feel like they were all participating in the group. Some fathers compared the experience to group therapy and felt like they could share feelings and emotions with the group that they would not be able to outside of it.

“You show up because it’s somewhere you really want to be... you want to hear how your friend’s doing, how everybody doing. Did they recover [from] whatever situation they were going through the week before? Could you pass on any information, a tip, or an idea to help them out? ... That’s why you go because it’s growth ... You took in some kind of new information you didn’t know before. You learn to express yourself or handle a situation in a manner you didn’t know before.”

- North Texas Father

Skill building

Many fathers described how the program provided them with skills to help them improve their relationships with their children, their children’s mother(s), and their extended families. Even fathers who were initially skeptical of the program or who felt that they were already good fathers said that they learned new skills from the program. Fathers explained that the program helped them realize that fighting with their children’s mother can negatively affect their children. Fathers also learned to see things from the mothers’ viewpoint and how they need to be open to meeting mothers halfway in a disagreement. One father described how he got a court order to see his daughter more frequently because he focused his efforts on improving his relationship with his daughter instead of blaming her mother. Another father noted that after he got involved with drugs and went to prison, he lost his connection with his family. After the program, his family reconnected with him because they see that he is moving his life in a positive direction.

One father talked about how he always wanted his children to respond to his orders quickly and, through the program, he learned to slow down when he was with his children. Another father discussed how he learned the importance of spending quality time with his children, talking with them and playing, rather than just working. He reflected on his relationship with his own father when he was a teen, in which his father and he worked together every day. He noted that although they spent a lot of time together, they were constantly working and they never played together.

"If you want your children to be successful you have to show them the right way. You have to be right with the mother, you can't argue with her all the time. The kids are gonna see that. That's messed them all up. [The program] It shows you, it helps."

- West Texas Father

Many fathers stated that before the program they did not think about what they said or how they communicated with their children or their children's mother. Before the program, many of them felt that they were repeating the cycle of how their fathers raised them or they were interacting with their children in inappropriate ways for their children's age. Some fathers described being impatient with their young children and expecting their young children to act like adults. The program encouraged fathers to talk to their children, play with them, and support them in ways beyond financial provision. Fathers said that they were more involved in their children's school lives and felt more prepared to deal with issues that children might bring to them such as drugs, relationships, and bullies.

Becoming better men and fathers

In general, fathers felt that the program helped them to be a better father, boyfriend, husband, and person. They felt that they had gained confidence, knowledge, awareness, integrity, and self-respect, which helped them to be better fathers, to help other fathers, and to help themselves. One father said that, by being more involved in his child's life, he was also more proactive in his own life. A few fathers said that they appreciated the material in the book and planned to take it home and read it again with the mother(s) of their children. One father said that thirteen weeks was an appropriate amount of time to show that he is committed to bettering himself.

Fathers described reevaluating the way they were living their lives and realizing that they might lose their children if they did not change their ways. They also felt that the program showed them that they had choices and control over some areas of their life. One father gave a hypothetical example where he described running out of gas on a highway. He said he could get mad and kick the gas tank or he could realize that the problem already existed and this about how to address the immediate problem with a cool head. For fathers who were going through difficult times, the program gave them hope. By helping fathers see what they could control, the program helped fathers move beyond what they could not change and focus on the things they could change.

Fathers' Needs beyond Programming

During the focus groups, fathers also spoke of the needs they have beyond the fatherhood programs. These needs largely centered on information and support to navigate the systems that intersect their lives, especially child support, and additional information about specific aspects of parenting.

Information and support for navigating government and legal systems

The fathers we spoke with needed basic background information on how the government systems that affect them actually work in practice. The information they received was mostly word-of-mouth and was often not true. This false information dissuaded many of the fathers from searching for needed and available resources. Many fathers talked about a general distrust of the legal system, especially in regards to child support. They explained how their children's mothers rarely had to prove they were good parents and that the burden of proof was always on fathers to show that they could take care of their children. Fathers appreciated that the program had given them the knowledge to be confident as fathers, but still felt that the court only saw them as "good" fathers if they could provide financially. Fathers felt frustrated that the mothers of their children could more easily access resources such as housing, food, and children's items, but that, as fathers, they were unable to access the same things.

Fathers reported needing advocates and information targeted specifically for their needs to help them navigate these systems and access appropriate resources and referrals. Common areas of need included the prison and legal system, custody, visitation, divorce, as well as programs to help veterans, active-duty military fathers, and fathers with disabilities.

Other commonly cited areas of need included housing support, managing finances, immigration and border issues, relationship and mental health counseling, and access to childcare and medical resources. Fathers talked about trying to manage college loans and confusion about how the government determined whether they were eligible for other financial programs. Fathers also talked about falling through the health care gap, where their PTSD might be treated but not their anxiety, and not knowing where to take their children for counseling services. Other fathers talked about children with expensive chronic health needs, as well as situations in which the mothers may have taken children outside of the country to complicate child custody disputes.

Additional information and support on parenting

Fathers also reported needing specific information about how to be fathers, including information on the needs of young fathers; non-residential fathers; soon-to-be fathers; and fathers with infants, daughters, and teenagers. Interestingly, fathers consistently mentioned wanting information for the last two areas—fathers of daughters and teenagers. Fathers stated very different expectations and much greater confusion on how to parent well when they have a daughter as compared to a son.

Fathers had questions about how to raise children in a world with easy access to the internet and social networking apps, and how to discipline and talk to their children. Fathers also needed specific advice about how to deal with multi-partner relationships in which their children may be vulnerable to violence in a household where they are no longer the resident father.

Ways to Strengthen Fatherhood Programming

The fathers with whom we spoke had helpful suggestions about how to improve outreach for the program and how to improve program services for fathers.

Increase targeted outreach

Some of the fathers heard about the program through word-of-mouth from other trusted fathers in their community. Some fathers were “strongly encouraged” to attend the program or referred to the program through other community resources. A few fathers were searching for a program like this and happened to see a flyer for it. Fathers suggested a more targeted approach to advertising the program.

Fathers suggested a number of places to outreach. They suggested the Salvation Army; housing/homeless shelters; other family-oriented programs; child support offices; probation and parole officers; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) programs; anger management programs; and schools to reach younger fathers. One father recommended advertising at local sporting events and even suggested a banner “behind home plate” reading, “Want to be a better dad? Call...” The fathers observed that they often see advertisements for mothers’ needs but that they do not see advertisements for programs to support fathers.

Additionally, when fathers were asked about whether they had heard of any home visiting programs in their communities, very few fathers indicated they were aware of these programs. In two of the three EFFECT sites we visited, PEI also funded home visiting programs. These programs, which target families with young children, could be an important area to target outreach to recruit fathers. The extent to which PEI facilitates and coordinates connections between the programs they fund in the same community could enhance the overall impact of efforts to support these families.

Biggest area for improvement: more opportunities to involve children

Some of the fathers’ suggestions for improving the program included providing more events or spaces for fathers to take their children when they spend time together. A father talked about having to always take his kids to the mall because it was the only place that was not hot and was relatively safe. Other fathers said they would attend an event for dads and their children at school, and another father wanted classes where they could bring their children and do activities together. One father talked about being able to bring teenagers specifically, so fathers could pass on advice and both teenagers and fathers could share their feelings with each other. Another father suggested a help hotline where fathers could call when they needed to talk to another father for support and advice.

Conclusion

Fathers were excited about programming targeted specifically for their needs as parents. Many fathers were aware of their limited influence on larger social systems that made it difficult for them to be better fathers. They reflected on the fathers they grew up with and communities that lacked positive role models. They were also passionate about resources they could use to become better fathers and ways to involve their peers in fatherhood programs. Many fathers felt this was the first time that they were valued as important actors in their children's lives.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

¹ Carlson, Marcia J. and Magnuson, Katherine. (2011). Low-Income Fathers' Influence on Children. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 635(95), 95-116.; Carlson, Marcia J., McLanahan, Sara S., and Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne. (2007, September). Fathers' Involvement and Young Children's Behavior in Fragile Families.; Carlson, Marcia J., McLanahan, Sara S. (2009, May 11). Fathers in Fragile Families. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. Working Paper WP09-14-FF.; Harris, Kathleen, Mullan, Frank F. Furstenberg, and Marmer, Jeremy K. (1998). Paternal involvement with adolescents in intact families: The influence of fathers over the life course. *Demography*, 35(2), 201-216.; Carlson, M. J. (2006). Family Structure, Father Involvement, and Adolescent Behavioral Outcomes. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68: 137-154.