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Fatherhood  
Research  
& Practice  
Network

# Full Report: Examining the Real Dads Read Program: Barbers' and Fathers' Reflections and Experiences



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# Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the implementation of a barbershop book-sharing/literacy-focused program, Real Dads Read. This study also examines how barbershops can be used as a book drive venue to give fathers and children access to new and culturally relevant children's books.

## About Real Dads Read

Fathers Incorporated established Real Dads Read (RDR) as a male involvement literacy program in 2017. The RDR program operates by placing little libraries in barbershops in order to encourage fathers to read to their children while they wait for a haircut. RDR aims to: (1) encourage African-American, pre-K to elementary school-aged children to enjoy reading, (2) improve literacy skills of those children, and (3) get African-American fathers involved in shared book-reading with their children. RDR operates on the belief that active father involvement positively affects children's education outcomes.

The program targets children from preschool to third grade. Fathers are able to share books in the barbershop and also take the books home for free. Books are replaced on a regular basis (between once or twice a month) by RDR team members. The program began with 20 barbershops throughout Atlanta, Georgia. The program partners with barbershops due to the belief that barbershops are an important resource in the African-American community that influences African-American people across generations. RDR partners with barbershops that either sought out the program themselves or were sought out by program leaders. When looking for an appropriate partner, the RDR team assesses the environment of the barbershop (for kid-friendliness/family orientation), then talks to the owner of the shop to see if they would like to conduct a literacy program in their shop.

In order for a barbershop to become a partner, the RDR team members explain the program to the shop owner and the owner signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines the program and emphasizes the conditions under which the barbershop should implement the program. Once the MOU has been signed, the team installs a little library and fills it with books. Currently, RDR has 83 little libraries across the region, with 68 of those located in barbershops and 15 located in elementary schools. Two barbershops are in Columbus, Georgia.

Because little libraries are distributed throughout a large metropolitan city, barbershops are separated into clusters of five or six shops based on their location. These clusters are divided amongst the RDR team so that team members refresh their clusters with new books on a regular basis. The team replaces old books with new ones, making sure to remove any tattered or worn books from the libraries.

A key feature of little libraries is a focus on culturally relevant books. The books feature a diverse range of main characters (both male and female) that are ethnically diverse, but predominately people of color, particularly African Americans. Books come from a variety of sources, including major publishers, partner donations (i.e., partnership with Marvel or other companies), and some books are purchased via catalog. Because the target age for the program is pre-K to third grade, most of the books provided are geared toward young children. However, there is a small percentage of books geared toward late elementary and middle school children. Some examples of popular books provided by RDR are *I Can do it Too* by Karen Baicker and Marvel's *Black Panther*.



## The Importance of Books and Fathers

RDR's core values emphasize the role of father figures in supporting their children's language and literacy development. Research suggests that children's literacy development is supported by both formal and informal home literacy activities (Sénéchal, 2006). According to Sénéchal (2006), informal literacy activities such as parent-child, home-book reading; the number of books in the home; and book-reading strategies (e.g., asking questions of children and pointing to key vocabulary as parents read books) are associated with children's vocabulary gains and improvements in listening comprehension. Formal home literacy activities include direct instruction of reading and writing and are related to early literacy skills such as letter names and sounds (Sénéchal, 2002). Overall, parental participation in home literacy activities is positively correlated with increased reading and math achievement and social emotional development for children (Baker, 2013; Suizzo, Pahlke, Yarnell, Chen, & Romero, 2014). Children from families who have more children's books in the home tend to have higher pre-K reading scores than children from families with fewer children's books in the home (McWayne, 2009). Additionally, parents who share books on a regular basis have children who evidence higher language and literacy skills (Bingham, 2007). Importantly, fathers in particular play a major role in the literacy development of their children and their engagement in shared literacy activities, such as sharing a book, strengthen the bonds between children and their fathers (Baker, 2017; Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2017; McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013).



RDR is targeted toward communities that are traditionally underserved in both access to books and in educational programming to support fathers or father figures in supporting their child's literacy and language development. RDR is designed to address the fact that African-American children from under-resourced backgrounds, particularly boys, tend to have lower academic outcomes in school as a function of limited access to literacy experiences (Husband, 2012). Scholars have attributed lower performance to a variety of challenges within and around children and families, including barriers to programming, racism, teacher bias, and financial difficulties within families and schools (Suizzo et al., 2014). RDR seeks to support fathers in supporting their children's academic success by getting them interested in and engaged in reading. Male involvement in literacy is important given findings suggesting that boys generally have a less positive attitude towards reading than do girls and that boys tend to prefer texts that are more informative, practical, or full of action, which may not be the texts incorporated in the school curriculum (Husband, 2012; Turner 2005). In addition, the developers of RDR understand that there is a strong need for books that are culturally relevant and portray African-American characters in manner in which children and youth can relate (Saracho, 2009).

## Purpose and Guiding Questions

The focus of this report is on barbers' implementation of the RDR program and fathers' general experiences with the program. Research questions that guided this investigation include: What are barbers' experiences with the RDR program? What are fathers' experiences with the program? What are factors (i.e., perceptions, behaviors, barriers) associated with barbers' or fathers' implementation of the program?



## Research Approach

Initial meetings between Father's Incorporated (FI) and the Georgia State University (GSU) Urban Child Study Center's research team were conducted to identify the purpose of evaluating the RDR program. After these meetings, the research team created a scope of work, developed research questions, and completed a literature review on studies around fathers and book sharing in barbershops. Further meetings were conducted to establish objectives, identify participating sites, discuss appropriate methods for collecting data, and troubleshoot onboarding and data collection issues.

In order to understand the RDR Program, GSU researchers began visiting sites with FI staff. During these visits, GSU researchers observed FI procedures for internal data collection. FI staff took note of the amount of books on the bookshelves, replenished books to shelf capacity (capacity was set at 35 books for larger bookshelves and 20 books for smaller bookshelves) and checked in with barbers about how things were going. FI staff also took note of how many barbers were present, the number of adult patrons in the shop (at the time of observation), how many children were in the shop, how many of those children were reading, and how many books the FI staff gave away before leaving the shop.

After observations of FI staff's procedures during site visits, additional meetings were undertaken with the FI team to gain insight for developing protocols for collecting data. Based on project research questions, GSU researchers developed a set of questions for barber interviews and questions for father surveys. Feedback on both tools was provided by FI staff. Once protocols were fully developed, Internal Research Board (IRB) approval was sought and obtained to collect data from barber interviews and father surveys.

A random sample of participating sites (35 sites) were chosen from the pool of barbershops (approximately 80 sites) that had authorization in which to operate. Of this random sample of shops, barbers were given the opportunity to participate in an in-person or phone interview. Regardless of whether barbers participated, every barber was encouraged to share the father surveys with all male clients who brought children to the shop. The GSU research team also provided each shop with signage, and fliers were used to recruit male clients to complete the survey. Owners of each shop were also encouraged to share the survey via the shop's social media pages. Despite such efforts, it was difficult to get fathers to complete the survey, either as a result of the online system (Qualtrics) that was used to consent and gather fathers' surveys, or as a result of fathers being disinterested in completing the survey.

GSU visited each barbershop several times a month starting in November 2018. The state of the bookshelves was noted upon these visits, with attention to their overall organization and presence in the barbershop (i.e., location, presence of books, neatness of bookshelf, etc.). These visits also included logging the books in the Goodreads database. This was done to look at trends in book sharing at each individual site and across all sites. During these visits, GSU researchers also conducted interviews with available barbers and encouraged fathers to complete the survey.

Fathers who consented to participate in the study completed an online survey via smartphone or computer and received \$10 via the Cash App application that is linked to their bank account. These fathers were identifiable, given that they provided their name or their Cash App handle to receive the survey. The surveys inquired about how often they read with their children, basic demographic data, and their experiences with the RDR program.

Barbers who consented to participate in the study completed an in-person or phone interview and received \$20 via the Cash App linked to their bank account. Interviews ranged from approximately 5 minutes to 21



minutes (average length = 10 minutes). In the interviews, the barbers were asked a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit demographic information, barbers' experiences with reading (i.e., reading habits), RDR program importance, program implementation, and program improvements. The structured interview questions are presented in [Table 1](#).

## Participants

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Barbershops were geographically situated in Atlanta, Georgia. Shops were located in six geographic clusters around this major city. Sites ranged in size from smaller barbershops with one barber to larger shops with ten barbers. It is important to note that book amount and size of bookshelves were dependent on the size of the shop. Larger shops typically received a larger bookshelf with more books, while smaller shops received smaller bookshelves with fewer books. Participants in this study included both barbers and fathers.



Twenty-one barbers participated in this study. All barbers were African American and all but three were male. Six of the barbers who participated in this study were owners or part-owners of their respective barbershops. This proved to be an important distinction because barbershop owners tended to be more knowledgeable about the RDR program. This may be due to the process of onboarding sites, where a formal MOU is completed with shop owners. In these shops, it was typical that FI staff would explain the program to the owner (or liaison), complete the MOU, and then the owner (or liaison) would share this information with additional barbers at the shop who did not participate in the initial meeting.

Ninety father/father-figure surveys were completed. Of these surveys, nine were discarded because of (1) duplicate surveys identified by the same Cash Tag (indicating that a father tried to fill out the survey more than once), (2) mothers who filled out the survey instead of fathers, and (3) fathers located in a different city who heard about the survey but had little knowledge of the program. Although mothers' experiences are important, they were not the focus of this study and, therefore, their responses were not included in the final sample. These three exclusionary criteria left a total of 81 respondents with recorded survey results.

Although respondents could be a father or father figure of the child at the barbershop, as anticipated, the majority of respondents were fathers (76.5%), and close to all of the respondents were Black/African American (97.5%). Fathers represented a diverse age span, ranging from 20 to 64 years old. Other relevant demographic information was that the majority of respondents were married (55.7%), with the next largest group reporting being single (26.6%). Eighty-seven percent of fathers reported children in the household, with the largest percentage of fathers reporting that they had two children (32.9%). Fathers also varied in their educational backgrounds. Almost 40% reported "some college" experience, while 32% reported having earned a bachelor's degree. Because the majority of respondents were fathers, for the remainder of this report, fathers and father figures are referred to simply as "fathers."



**Table 1. Demographics of Fathers and Father Figures Who Completed Online Surveys**

| Variable                          | n  | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|----|------------|
| <i>Relationship to Child</i>      |    |            |
| Father                            | 62 | 76.5       |
| Grandfather                       | 1  | 1.2        |
| Stepfather                        | 2  | 2.5        |
| Father Figure                     | 2  | 2.5        |
| Uncle                             | 8  | 9.9        |
| Other                             | 6  | 7.4        |
| Total                             | 81 | 100.0      |
| <i>Years of School Completed</i>  |    |            |
| Some High School                  | 3  | 3.7        |
| Graduated High School             | 12 | 14.8       |
| Some College                      | 32 | 39.5       |
| Graduated College                 | 26 | 32.1       |
| Graduate Degree                   | 8  | 9.9        |
| Total                             | 81 | 100.0      |
| <i>Marital Status</i>             |    |            |
| Single                            | 21 | 26.6       |
| Married/Cohabiting                | 44 | 55.7       |
| Divorced                          | 6  | 7.6        |
| Separated                         | 5  | 6.3        |
| Other                             | 3  | 3.8        |
| Total                             | 79 | 100.0      |
| <i>Children in Household</i>      |    |            |
| Zero                              | 10 | 13.2       |
| One                               | 18 | 23.7       |
| Two                               | 25 | 32.9       |
| Three                             | 15 | 19.7       |
| Four or More                      | 8  | 10.5       |
| Total                             | 76 | 100.0      |
| <i>Distance of Home from Shop</i> |    |            |
| Within 1 Mile                     | 13 | 16.0       |
| Miles                             | 29 | 35.8       |
| 6-10 Miles                        | 20 | 24.7       |
| 20 Miles                          | 12 | 14.8       |
| > 20 Miles                        | 7  | 8.6        |
| Total                             | 81 | 100.0      |

Note: Not all totals on demographic variables equal 81, as some fathers chose not to answer certain questions.



## Assessments/Measures

Father surveys focused on three key areas: (1) experiences with the RDR program, (2) beliefs about the role of parents/fathers in supporting children's academic success/achievement, and (3) demographic information. Respondents answered these questions in a Likert-style format, with slightly different response formats given the nature of questions.

### Experiences with the RDR Program

Experiences with the RDR program focused on fathers' reading enjoyment and how often they shared books with their children. It also asked questions about fathers' perceptions of the RDR program, the nature of the RDR libraries (e.g., the culturally relevant nature of books, barbers encouragement of the child's engagement while at the barbershop, children's interest in the barbershops), and the frequency of fathers' engagement with RDR libraries (how often they utilized the libraries, brought books home) or difficulty in sharing books with their child. For frequency items, fathers indicated how often they engaged in activities on the following Likert response formats (1= never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = mostly, 5 = always). For questions related to father's beliefs about their child's learning, Likert responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Items were summed together for a composite score, with reliability statistics indicating strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

### Father's Beliefs

A series of questions also asked fathers about their beliefs about their children's learning and the importance of their involvement in their child's education. Items used for this belief survey were taken from Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro's (2007) study examining parents' literacy-related beliefs. This nine-item scale asks parents to respond to items related to their impact on their child's learning and development and the shared responsibility that they have with schools in supporting their children's achievement generally. Items include general literacy beliefs focused on home and school influences on learning (e.g., "children do better in school when parents also teach them things at home"), attention to parental modeling or support in the home (e.g., "my child will be a more successful student if s/he sees me reading and writing"), and instrumental ways that parents can assist children with learning (e.g., "it is important for me to help my child with homework."). A scale score was created by summing items together. Reliability statistics indicated strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

### Qualitative Examination of Barber's Experiences

Qualitative methods were employed to gain a deeper understanding of barbers' experiences with the RDR program. One-on-one interviews were undertaken with barbers who were identified randomly from participating barbershops. Interviews were conducted at barbershops at a time convenient for participants. In order to examine participants' experiences with RDR, interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. Transcripts were loaded into the online qualitative software, Dedoose. This online tool was used to organize and then code responses. Sociolinguistic analyses, based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), proceeded in two phases. During the first phase, the research team read and analyzed interview data with attention to the research questions. Interviews were open coded to examine participant experiences, making meaning of ways in which barbers might talk about how they supported children's early literacy development, either directly or indirectly as it relates to program features (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process generated a large number of codes from the data. Once these initial codes were generated, a second wave of data analysis was undertaken. During this process, researchers went back to the data with developed categories in mind in order to identify broader themes/findings. This thematic analysis allowed the research team to



condense and refine codes in ways that produced more coherent understanding of the data. This second round of coding resulted in themes that illustrated barbers' varied experiences with the RDR program. Findings from these analyses are described in detail below.

## Findings

Findings are presented for both fathers and barbers. As outlined previously, barbers' and fathers' experiences were captured through different data sources. In this section, father survey responses are presented first, followed by barber interview data.

### Father Outcomes

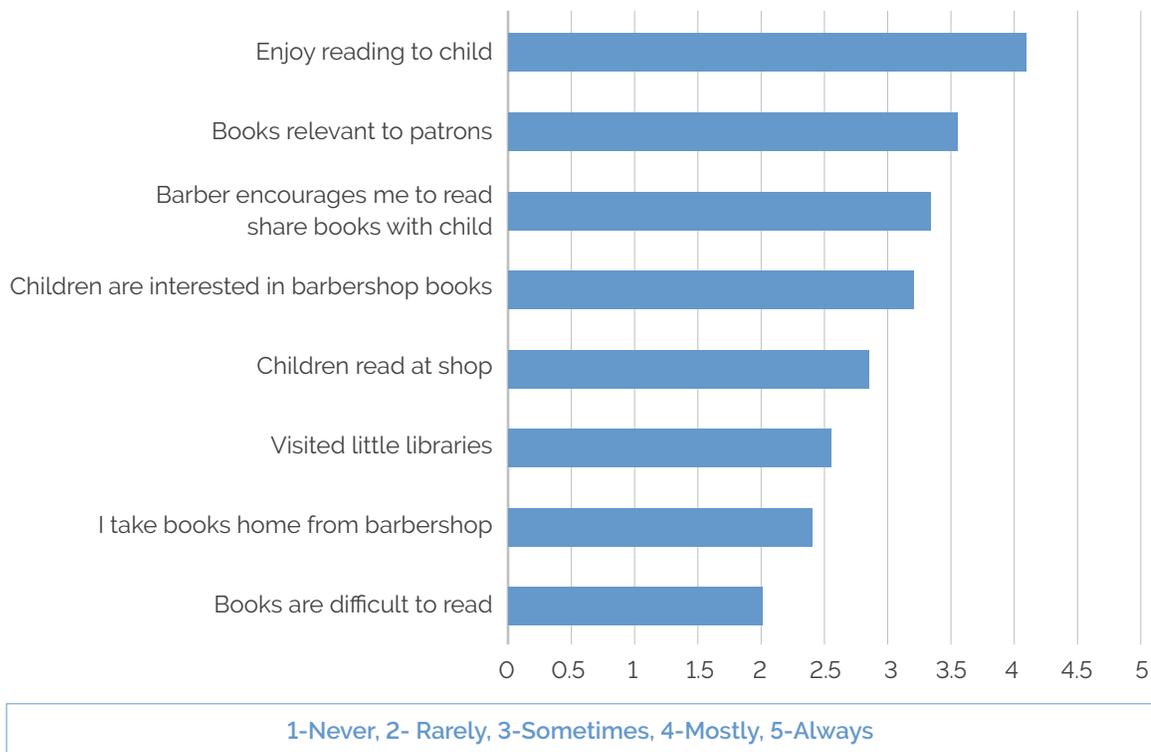
Fathers responded to a series of questions about their *experiences with the RDR program*. These questions pertained to:

- Their enjoyment for reading to or sharing books with their child
- Whether they perceived the books in the RDR library to be culturally relevant
- The extent to which the barber encouraged fathers to read/share books
- Children's interest in the barbershop books
- Children's reading or looking at books in the barbershop
- How frequently fathers visited little libraries
- How frequently fathers took books home from barbershop
- The extent to which books are difficult to read

When asked about the frequency of their engagement in literacy experiences with their child, fathers reported modest engagement. Results, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#), demonstrate that fathers reported enjoyment while engaging their child in reading activities. Fathers also reported that they only sometimes read to their child at the barbershop and sometimes but rarely took books home from the shop. The fact that fathers did not always bring their children to the shop might explain lower scores on items pertaining to the frequency of engagement in reading activities while at the shop. In addition, qualitative responses suggested that some fathers did not take the books home because they wanted to leave them for others to enjoy, while a few fathers were unaware that they could take the texts home (i.e., they thought that the books were to remain in the barbershop).

Fathers reported that the books were not difficult to read and that they were accessible within the barbershop, noting that the bookshelves provided a nice spot to display the books. Fathers also noted that the books were culturally relevant in nature. Qualitative responses suggested that they appreciated that the books reflected modern and historic black characters or content that was relevant to their community. Regarding interactions with barbers around books, fathers reported that barbers "sometimes" encouraged them to read books to their children. They appreciated when barbers would suggest reading or taking a book home. They also appreciated it when barbers directly engaged their child with the books. As one father noted, this tended to take the "pressure" off of the father having to push the book to their child. Finally, fathers reported that they rarely visited the little libraries that have been established as part of RDR book sharing program.



**Figure 1. Fathers' self-reported experiences with Real Dads Read**

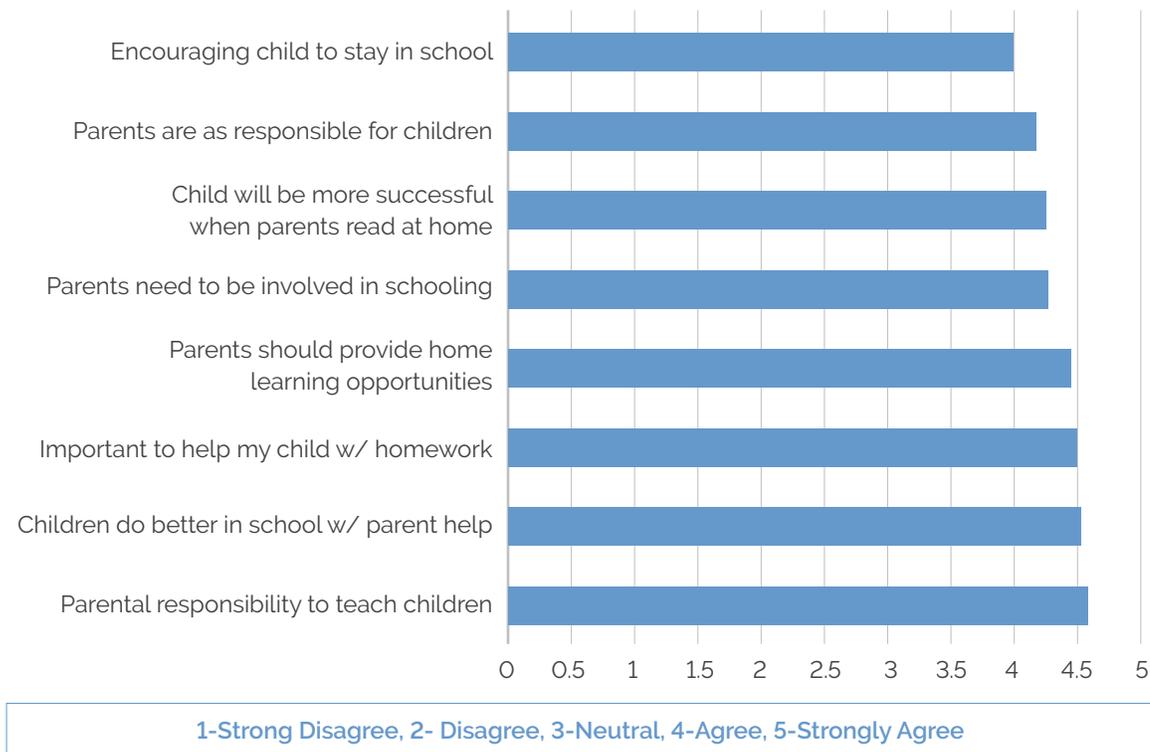
### Fathers' Achievement Related Beliefs

A series of questions also asked fathers about their beliefs about their children's learning and the importance of their involvement in their child's education. Fathers agreed with all of the belief statements (see [Figure 2](#)), illustrating that they held facilitative beliefs about the importance of their role in their child's learning and school achievement. Fathers most strongly endorsed statements about the importance of their involvement in their child's academic success and the responsibility of parents in teaching children in the home. They also endorsed statements focused on the facilitative role of education in their child's life and the importance of supporting children's learning at home by assisting with homework. Fathers agreed with statements about the importance of encouraging children to stay in school and that parents were equally responsible as schools for children's achievement.

### Associations between Beliefs and Program Experience

Correlational analyses were generated in order to examine the extent to which fathers' beliefs, educational backgrounds, and program experiences with RDR in the barbershop were related. To this end, we entered father beliefs, RDR program experiences, parental age, and years of school completed into a correlational matrix. Results revealed that fathers with more education reported more positive parental beliefs about their role in their child's learning ( $r = .31, p < .01$ ), but not with their experiences with RDR. Associations among key variables revealed that RDR experience was positively related with home learning experiences ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ), suggesting that fathers who reported more engagement in the program also reported more home learning experiences for their child(ren). As expected, fathers' beliefs were related to the frequency with which they reported reading with their child at home. ( $r = .31, p < .01$ ). Father age was unrelated to all other variables.

**Figure 2. Fathers' self-reported beliefs about the role of parents/fathers in supporting children's academic success/achievement**

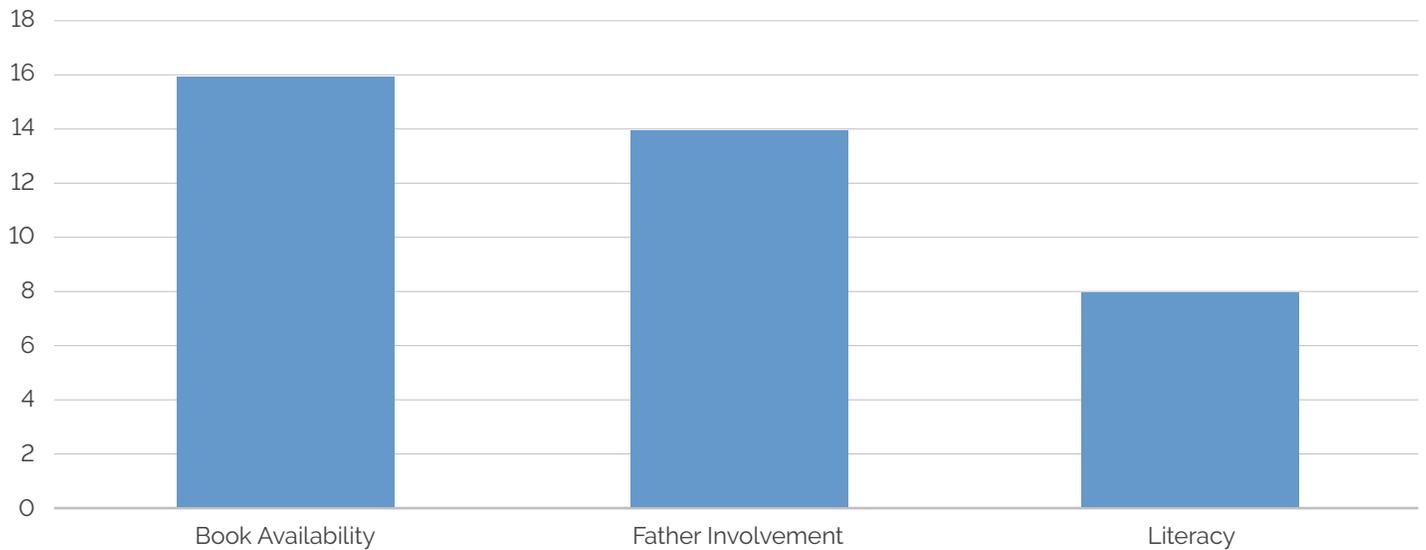


### Qualitative Responses to RDR

In addition to responding to Likert questions about their experiences with the RDR program and their beliefs about their role in their children's learning, fathers were also queried with open-ended responses focused on what they liked about the RDR program and were asked to make suggestions for program improvement. Questions included, (1) "Tell us some things that you like about the Real Dads Read (Book Sharing) Program," (2) "What do you think could be improved about the Real Dads Read Program?" and (3) "Any other thoughts about the program or your experience?" Fathers generally had positive views of the program, but a few themes emerged, which are captured in [Figures 3](#) and [4](#).

When prompted to describe aspects about the RDR program that they liked, fathers' responses fell into three general categories: (1) the availability of books, (2) the importance of father involvement in literacy, and (3) how important it is to support children's literacy development. Sixteen fathers wrote in responses demonstrating appreciation for how the program was making books available for themselves and other fathers. Fourteen fathers wrote something that described how the program was helpful in promoting father involvement in educational experiences, such as book reading. Finally, eight fathers mentioned that they appreciated how the program was supporting children's literacy development or interest in books. These fathers suggested that literacy skills were foundational to school success. Although responses may not be representative of all dads in this sample given the low response rate on open-response items, qualitative responses (taken together with overwhelmingly positive survey responses) demonstrate that fathers perceived the importance of supporting children's reading development and that the program was helpful in supporting their ability to share books with their children.

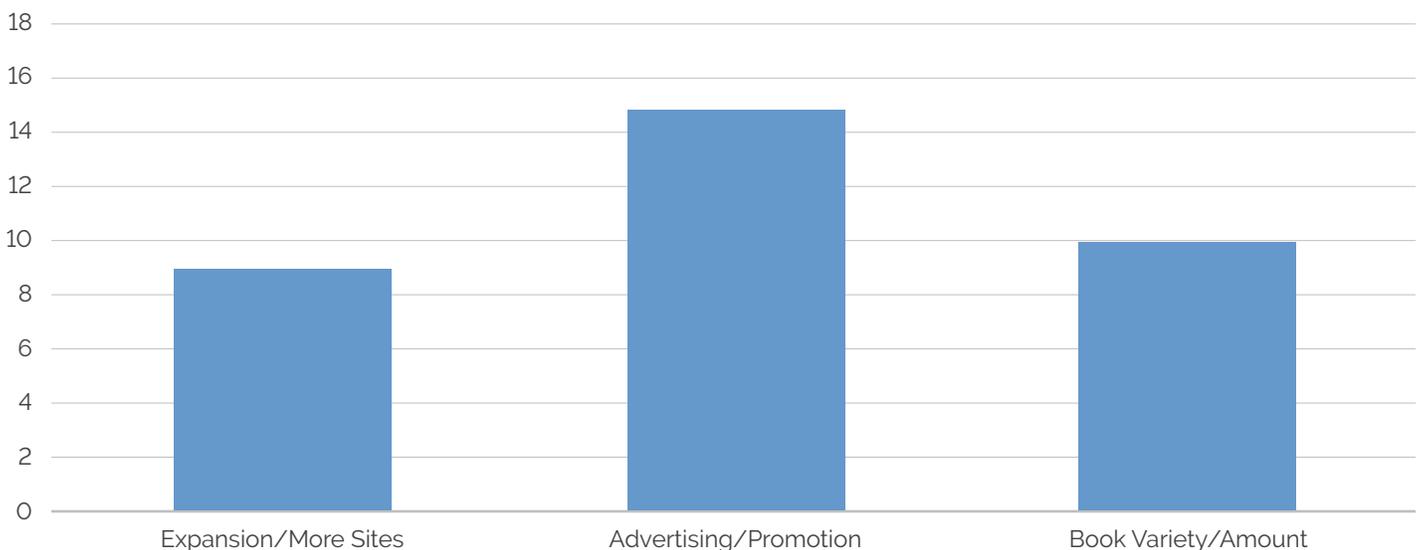
**Figure 3. Father's open-ended responses articulating positive features of the RDR program**



*Note: Father involvement refers to fathers' reported involvement in literacy activities. Literacy refers the importance of literacy for children's learning.*

Approximately two-thirds of father respondents did not provide suggestions for improvement for the RDR program. For the remaining fathers in the sample, responses focused on program improvements that generally fell into three categories. As illustrated by [Figure 4](#), 15 fathers, the largest group, suggested that the program would benefit from more advertising or focused marketing. These fathers endorsed the program, but felt as though it could be promoted more both (1) within barbershops, to increase the nature of the signage and information about the program, and (2) outside the barbershops (i.e., targeted marketing to disseminate information about the program and its presence in order to get the word out about the program and its availability within barbershops). Ten fathers suggested that the variety of books could be increased as well as the number of books available to be taken home. A few fathers within this category felt as though the shelves of the barbershop libraries could use more books and that books could cater to a somewhat larger audience. Finally, nine fathers suggested that the program could be expanded to encompass additional sites. They had positive feedback about the program and thought that additional expansion could increase the impact of the program.

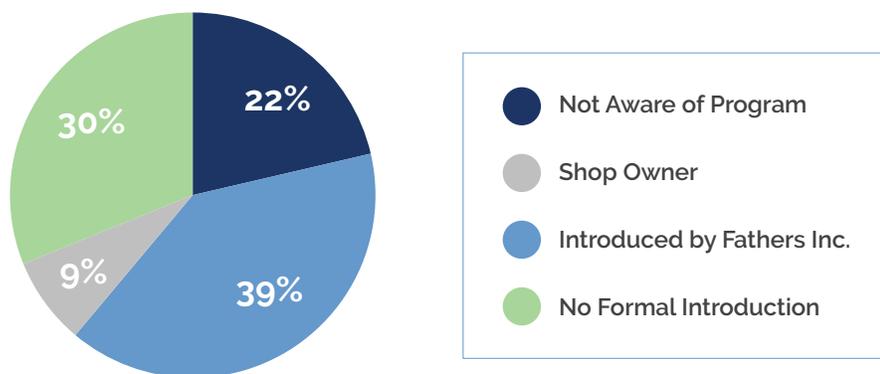
**Figure 4. Father feedback about the RDR program**



## Barber Outcomes

During their semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, barbers discussed their experiences with the RDR program. At the beginning of this interview, barbers were asked to explain their introduction to the program in order to get a sense of how they were onboarded or introduced to the RDR program. The purpose of asking this first set of questions was to gain a better understanding of the nature of their experience during the onboarding process and to examine whether initial experiences might relate to program implementation. Barbers articulated varying introductions to the program and four categories emerged: (1) barbers who expressed little understanding of the program, (2) barbers who were the shop owner and who were part of the onboarding process of getting the library up and running, (3) barbers who were aware of the program but who had never had any formal introduction to the program, and (4) barbers who were introduced to the program by Fathers Inc. personnel. These categories are represented in [Figure 5](#).

**Figure 5. Barbers Onboarding Experience with the Real Dads Read program**



Barbers introduced by Fathers Inc members commented on being introduced to the program in various ways, such as:

*They came in the barbershop . . . and did a little presentation.*

*They first came to us about four years ago. They wanted to bring books and asked for us to collect books. And it progressed and it moved to . . . they actually built a small library in the barbershop 18 months to 2 years after our initial contact with them. So yeah, from the books that we gathered and the books they were bringing, they were able to build a library in the barbershop.*

Some barbers with limited formal introduction to the program reported that they were able to make their own inferences by seeing the books in the barbershop or overhearing conversations within the shop. For example, one barber, when asked how he was introduced to the program, stated that it was *by just seeing the books in the barbershop and then seeing the little pamphlets and stuff around*. Barbers who expressed no formal introduction to the program appeared less knowledgeable about, and less committed to, the RDR program (i.e., they reported little connection to the program).

Five barbers were not aware of the program before completing an interview. These barbers reported that they had seen the books in the shop but were not aware that there was a program attached to them or they had never noticed the books in the barbershop. Although two of these barbers had been at their respective shops for less than five months, it was clear from the interview that the barbers had little working knowledge about the program in a manner that might support its implementation. During interviews with these barbers, these



five barbers made reference to the fact that given the nature of the venue, an active barbershop with multiple barbers, that it was difficult to pass on information to all barbers in the shop because *everybody's their own boss*.

Although barbers varied in their exposure to the program and the time in which the program had been present at their shops, it appeared that there was a correlation between the nature of barbers' introduction to the program and their likelihood to promote or interact with the program. Barbers introduced to the program by Fathers Inc in some formal manner were most likely to participate wholeheartedly because they felt a collective responsibility for implementing the program. The majority of barbers with no formal introduction to the program appeared less involved. These barbers seemed to have limited working knowledge of the program and were not able to articulate the program's mission.

### **Barbers' Own Literacy Histories Related to Program Implementation**

Barbers' literacy experiences and histories appeared to be connected to the way in which they experienced the program. Because previous research documents that adults who read often value the enjoyment and academic benefits of reading, barbers were queried about their reading habits, such as reading for pleasure in their spare time. Out of 16 barbers who were asked if they read for pleasure, 13 barbers reported that they were "readers," while 3 suggested that they did not read books or other texts for pleasure. Barbers reporting that they read in their spare time provided a list of different reading materials and varying subject matter (examples ranged from the Bible to history books, to real estate material). Although all barbers expressed positive views about the importance of literacy to a child's success, they espoused somewhat different views about how one should go about supporting children to love reading. Barbers who were readers also tended to take a community-minded approach to their barbershops and espouse the view that it served as an important resource for men and fathers. These barbers were also more likely to talk explicitly about the RDR program in ways that were more specific and descriptive, demonstrating more sophisticated knowledge about the importance of the program and an understanding of its goals and mission.

Barbers' presentation of their own experiences with reading for pleasure or in school appeared related to how they messaged the RDR program to fathers and in their perception of how it linked to their work as barbers. In addition, there appeared to be a direct link between barbers' own literacy knowledge and experiences and their implementation of RDR. We categorized reported participation in relation to how barbers discussed the following activities: encouraging children to read, encouraging dads to read with their child(ren), and encouraging children to take books home. Barbers who viewed literacy as an important life skill were most likely to direct children to the RDR libraries when they entered the barbershop. Barbers who reported "pushing" the program with children appeared to be personally connected to the program. For example, many barbers cited their own experiences with literacy as the reason they are so adamant about encouraging kids to read:

*I was 19 years old before I really realized . . . I had finished school before I really realized the joy of reading a book. Like, reading a book. Wow, that was a trip. I read my first novel or whatever and I was amazed where the book took me. Like how I was able to visualize and just see what the reader was tryna portray. So . . . if you can get that at an early age, it's easier to read.*

For some barbers, the importance of books and learning was captured by their own struggles with reading. These barbers were less likely to talk about how reading had opened doors for them, but rather how reading had been a struggle or how it had not helped them succeed as they had wanted. Despite this struggle, barbers who spoke of these experiences emphasized the importance of education generally. One barber summarized this point by stating:



*See, I read a lot too . . . and . . . I dropped outta high school. But I still went to college. I got my GED. Still went to school. You know what I'm saying? So, I know how it is about the education so I'm very on that. Very big on that.*

Although most barbers endorsed parents as children's first teachers, barbers who thought that parents were influential to their children's literacy were split on how they chose to implement the program and whether they encouraged parents to read in the shop. For example, one barber who did not encourage parents to read with their children in the barbershop mentioned that literacy development has to start in the home, saying, "To see a dad reading as a kid you're gonna be like 'well my dad always reads I wanna do it too.' So, if the parents aren't doing it then you really can't expect the kids to do it." On the other hand, another barber who believed in the importance of a parent's influence on reading behavior cited that as the reason he strongly implemented the program.

Out of 20 interview excerpts from barbers about their personal views on literacy, eight barbers referred to the importance of reading to children and its impact on their literacy achievement. Six barbers brought up thoughts about how parents are influential in supporting a child's literacy skills, with three of those barbers highlighting the importance of dads specifically. Three barbers viewed literacy through a school-based lens, meaning they associated literacy skills with years of formal education or with practices such as book reports or essays. Lastly, three barbers stated that some individuals may struggle with reading because of other factors or have "different skills" than reading. Barbers who viewed literacy as "not for everyone" were most likely to have a relaxed implementation of the program or a philosophy that prioritized individual choice or interest in whether children should be encouraged to read books. One barber summed this ideology by saying, "All we can do is encourage those that, that, who wanna seek the knowledge. And those that don't, you know you could plant the seed . . . but, you know. They gotta make it grow." Although these barbers suggested that reading was important, they were more passive in their reported behaviors to support father's and children's implementation of the program.



### **Barbers with Community Missions Connected More Deeply with the Program**

Barbers who espoused views of barbershops being resources to their communities spoke more eloquently about the program, its mission, and how they supported dads or children in engaging with the libraries. Barbers who viewed the barbershop as a community resource tended to view RDR as central to the atmosphere of the shop and an extension of the work that barbers already do. These barbers emphasized the "outward facing" nature of the barbershop as a place of trust and connection within their African-American community. For example, as stated by two barbers:

*As barbers in the barbershop, we got a lot of influence on the community. We got a lot of people that run through our chairs. We give a lot of grown men advice, we give a lot of kids advice. You know, so it's a real influential environment. So I think that it's a great place to put the program.*



*The father-son experience in the barbershop is probably an intimate space that you don't get at home.*

Barbers with this mindset not only emphasized how they were seen as trusted figures within the community but also suggested that the program connected well with their business philosophy. In addition, barbers who espoused this philosophy described the program as easy to implement. For example, one barber suggested:

*I mean, it really doesn't require a whole bunch of space to just set up a little library like that and supply books. But I think [the barbershop is] a great environment for something like that because we have so many children that come through the doors on a day to day basis like it's a lot and these babies just need to be introduced to things.*

Finally, barbers who discussed their connection with the community were more likely to emphasize that the barber shop was not just a place of business but that it was a community resource for men and fathers. Many of these barbers (about one-third) pointed to the pivotal role that their shop played within their neighborhood and emphasized the care that they offered to patrons, in supplying both a service and additional supports.

*It's just a point of wanting to give back to the community. Offering something just besides, you know, a service. It's going beyond this commerce of exchange. They come here and they can read.*

*I think [the program] brings a spirit of community activism to your barbershop, to care for your clients and it can help bring some peace and calm and a tool for educating your clients. And being helpful to their family. It's non-invasive, it's a good look for your barbershop to have a shelf with some books on it. So it's just an all-around, great addition to any barbershop.*

Consistent with previous research (Shabazz, 2016), barbers in this study who saw themselves as a personal and professional resource for families emphasized that the barbershop was a gathering place for African-American men. They emphasized their role as a trusted source of information and as a place where men can discuss a variety of topics, including literacy. Such findings are in line with research on barber shops as safe space where men can be themselves and as a place where men can seek advice and social support (Hart & Bowen, 2004). Consistent with this body of research, barbers who were "outward facing" in the manner in which they positioned the RDR program within their barbershop emphasized that African-American fathers and families come to barbershops for community as well as for a haircut.

### **Positive Views of the Program: Varied Understandings**

Barbers all reported that the program was important and filled a need within the community. However, barbers varied somewhat in their description of the program and the manner in which they supported its goals. An analysis of Barbers' views about the program, resulted in responses generally falling into three categories: the importance of dads reading to their children (12 responses), how the program was beneficial to children's reading development (9 responses), and the importance of the program to general literacy achievement (6 responses). While some barbers who were aware of the program knew that it targeted Black men and boys, they had different understandings for why that may be so. Some considered the books to be an educational alternative to children's technology use, while others emphasized the importance of encouraging the development of literacy skills in the African-American community specifically. Other barbers focused on the benefit of having kids read so that they can expand their knowledge.

For example, when asked about the program, barbers primarily summarized the program with attention to how it was centered in barbershops to have more impact and to connect with men who might not experience the program otherwise. As one barber stated:



*Well, basically it's promotin'... I think it's mostly barbershops cuz that's where a lot of men circulate . . . men and their children, kind of promoting literacy in the community. And being that this is a Black barbershop, and I know that they're probably in others, I think that they're also part of our other shop . . . I think it's a promotion of literacy to the Black community. To the best of my ability. Or in the community, period. You know, kind of promoting the relationship between men and their children and kind of getting' dads to promote literacy amongst the younger people.*

In some regards, fathers described the program as encouraging literacy and discouraging technology or being on devices. In fact, many barbers referred to how the program was designed to build literacy knowledge or a love for reading and diminish children's exposure to TVs or electronics, which were often discussed in a negative light.

*Um, from my knowledge, uh, you guys come in and uh leave books and um pretty much uh advertise that it would be good for dads to read to their kids when they're sitting here in the barbershop just to give them a little bit of entertainment and education at the same time so they won't be in their electronics, ya know, in that nature to get 'em away from the TVs and stuff.*

*Um, literacy. Comprehension. Being able to uh . . . understand what you reading. And all facts, everything is based around that. Your understanding of what's on that paper. So I think that that's a, uh, a great benefit to . . . to our youth because some people don't take the time to, to work extra with the kids at home.*

### **Barbers Report Encouraging Fathers, but Specific Strategies Are Limited**

Positive views of the program led to discussions about the manner in which barbers supported the program beyond allowing access of RDR staff to their barbershops. Barbers were specifically queried about any practices or supports they offered to encourage fathers to share books with their children, children to look at books, or families to take a book home. Because barbers demonstrated different levels of understanding of the RDR program, their description of what they did to support or encourage involvement largely emphasized telling children or fathers to read (i.e., "I encourage them to look at the books"). Many of these statements tended toward general "encouraging" behaviors. When prompted to give specific examples of things they might do to draw attention to the program, barbers mentioned a number of different strategies that they employed, including leading by example (n = 3), behavior management (n = 4), directive to read book (n = 3), solicit the parents (n = 2), let the kids talk about the books (n = 2), turn reading into a game (n = 1), educate fathers about the importance of literacy (n = 1), and set a schedule for reading to kids (n = 1). These varied examples demonstrate that there was a not a unified way, or a shared understanding, about how to encourage fathers to use the books or encourage children to use the books while in the barbershops. Below are a few key examples that illustrate the categories referenced previously.

**Leading by example:** *You know me personally I try to help people understand the necessity of it. And sometimes that's just by leading by example. Like if they see you doing it then they want to do it. They understand the importance of it.*

**Behavior management:** *When they sitting around here playing and stuff like that I might tell them to get a book or something like that. You know? To keep them occupied.*

**Solicit the parents:** *I might start saying hey man go grab a book and read to your son. Especially if they sitting there watchin' tv. "Aye man read a book to your kid." Cause I'll say that type of stuff. "When the last time you read to your son?" Make em feel guilty.*



**Directive to kids:** *When a kid gets a book I say I think you'd like this book. Then I explain to them what it is. And then an older kid I say "you need to read this."*

During the process of asking barbers to reflect on the program, some barbers mentioned that they would benefit from a formal introduction to some strategies for program promotion. These barbers remarked on their willingness to learn more about approaches that could support getting dads more involved in the program. They also suggested that they would enjoy learning more about how fathers might share literacy with their children. Some barbers (n = 4) suggested that they would enjoy learning from other barbers about what they did to get fathers reading or ways in which other barbers were able to successfully implement the program.

### Challenges with Program Implementation

When asked to comment on challenges in program implementation or reflect on factors that affect program implementation at their respective barbershops, barbers cited challenges related to the nature of the books (n = 5), the libraries (n = 6), fathers themselves (n = 6), the children (n = 8), the barbershop as a book-sharing venue (n = 4), and a lack of program awareness (n = 6). Barbers did not have a difficult time identifying challenges with implementation, and their perceptions of these challenges appeared to be connected to the ways in which barbers tended to support the program at their respective sites.

One focus of barbers' comments about program challenges related to library visibility. Some barbers suggested that the little library can get lost in the business of the barbershop and that the libraries could benefit from having signs or bright colors to draw children's and parents' attention. This point was most likely to be made in larger versus smaller barbershops. As some barbers were unaware of the program, or at least less knowledgeable about the program in relation to other barbers, program awareness was noted and came up many times in conversations with barbers. Barbers, for example, suggested that informative signs near the libraries could help with program promotion, since some fathers and barbers did not know details of the program. One shop owner phrased this suggestion well, saying, "I don't know their advertising budget or whatever but advertising would be a great help because I don't think a lot of people know about uh, Real Dads Read. They just think that this is something I'm doing." Another barber who was a proponent for informational signs commented, "So if I saw a sign that said my son is gonna be more successful if I read to him and then I don't read to him, what does that say about me?" Barbers wanted the program to be successful and thought that additional signage would help clarify the purpose of the RDR program and increase its impact.

In relation to the books, most barbers expressed that the books appealed to their patrons. A few remarked that the age level was either too old or too young for the children they serve. Barbers had questions about the intended target age for the books in the libraries, as well as concerns about the durability of paperback books, which can be easily torn apart by children. Barbers who questioned the books did not have strong suggestions for how to improve the offerings but rather wondered aloud about the target age group, suggesting that they did not have a strong understanding of the intended audience. Importantly, barbers noted that the books were culturally appropriate, a limitation of many books previously identified in academic literature (Saracho, 2009).

The majority of challenges stated by barbers related to factors involved with getting children interested in, and engaged with, the books. Barbers mentioned that children may not feel motivated to read because (1) there are few incentives attached to the program, (2) children may be generally disinterested in reading, (3) some children may not be allowed near the books due to destructive behavior, and (4) competition from other sources of entertainment (i.e., some children would rather play video games or watch TV than look at books). Barbers noted that children are often distracted or there are competing interests (or distractions) in barbershops that can make sharing books with children challenging. For example, as stated by one barber, "Most kids now wanna be



on the iPad and stuff like that. When we get to the house, we tell them to get a book, and they don't want to get a book." To combat this issue, two barbers suggested that RDR should have an online/social media presence so that kids and parents feel as though they are interacting with the program through the integration of technology or through digital books.

Some barbers shared concerns around how to encourage fathers to engage in literacy activities with their child. Barbers who anticipated negative reactions from fathers being told to read were less likely to promote the program and seemed concerned with helping the father "save face." Challenges with fathers were described in the following ways:

**Low literacy skills:** *Literacy amongst black men can be kinda low and I don't want them to feel embarrassed if I put pressure on them and they read and they don't read as fluently as they would like to.*

**Barber not wanting to overstep:** *I feel as a parent and you seeing your child tryna [trying to] read a book that you need to step in and help them out and read. That's how I feel. But I don't, too much, you know, tell people how to raise their kids.*

**Father regular literacy practices:** *If your clientele is majority men and they don't read, then the likelihood of them actually sitting down in a public setting and reading to their sons, it might not be so hot.*

These barbers' concerns appeared to be connected with the idea that many fathers from their community struggled with reading themselves or, perhaps, were not particularly interested in reading to begin with. Although it is true that African-American children are more likely to perform lower on standardized reading assessments than their White peers, most of this difference is due to the likelihood that African-American children have less access to books and strong classroom instruction as a function of being raised in low-income households and neighborhoods. As others have argued (see Bauman and Wasserman, 2009; Oritz, 2001; Saracho, 2007), when fathers are given the resources and appropriate programming to become engaged in their children's literacy, they are eager and excited to participate.

Although only openly named by one barber, it was noted that fathers may not engage as much in supporting their children's literacy because such an activity might be perceived as feminine in nature. This comment is captured below by a barber who expressed:

*You know a lot of fathers . . . parents . . . males . . . I don't know, they think it's feminine to do something like that. You know . . . who wouldn't?*

Such a comment is in line with previous research with fathers, particularly those who come from more educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Bauman and Wasserman (2009) document that before fathers engaged in a series of educational workshops, many felt that fostering literacy development was the role of the female parent. These fathers were also unaware of specific activities, such as drawing pictures and shared book-reading, that could foster their children's development. These findings may suggest that additional steps may be needed with some fathers (and barbers) to support their understanding about the importance of engaging in certain literacy activities that are traditionally viewed as feminine.

Lastly, four barbers brought up the challenge they had experienced with the barbershop as a venue for a literacy program. While the majority of barbers agreed that barbershops were a valuable location for RDR to operate, and many commented on their community focus (i.e., how they served as a resource to families), some suggested it was not always a conducive setting:



**Atmosphere can be too busy:** *[The success of a program like this depends] on the individual and the environment. Cause some can read with music blasting and shots firing and some can't.*

**People are focused on haircuts:** *It's more of a multi-tasking when you come to the barbershop. A lot of people just like focus on coming here, getting a haircut and moving on. So now when you come to the barbershop, now you talking about sitting and reading, and you know, sometimes people escape in their phones when they come here.*

The program challenges are illustrated in the following table, along with the number of excerpts from barber interviews that mentioned the challenge.

**Table 2. Barber reported challenges with RDR implementation**

|  | Number of times mentioned |
|--|---------------------------|
| <b>Book Challenges</b>                       |                           |
| Problems with books                          | 2                         |
| Target age is unclear                        | 3                         |
| <b>Kid Challenges</b>                        |                           |
| Lack of incentives                           | 2                         |
| Disinterest                                  | 2                         |
| Child behavior                               | 2                         |
| Technology                                   | 6                         |
| <b>Library Challenges</b>                    |                           |
| Limited visual appeal                        | 2                         |
| Difficult to see in the barbershop           | 5                         |
| <b>Father Challenges</b>                     |                           |
| Low literacy rates                           | 2                         |
| Barber does not want to overstep             | 2                         |
| May not engage in regular literacy practices | 2                         |
| Views reading as feminine (mothers)          | 1                         |
| <b>Venue Challenges</b>                      |                           |
| Atmosphere can be too loud/busy              | 1                         |
| Difficult to engage all barbers              | 1                         |
| People are focused on haircuts, not books    | 2                         |



## Discussion

RDR is a book distribution program that seeks to address issues of access to high-quality, culturally relevant books for African-American fathers and their children. This program is predicated on the understanding that barbers are an untapped community resource that can be leveraged to support fathers' engagement in book reading activities in order to support children's literacy development. This program is built off of other successful models for incorporating resources into barbershops, which serve as important community touchpoint for urban African-American communities. Findings from this study illustrate the promise of the RDR program as evidenced by barbers' positive views. However, variation in barber experience with program implementation was apparent as a function of barber's personal literacy histories and their orientation to the program. Challenges with barber implementation of the RDR program are similar to research in other programs that have used barbershops to deliver socially important information. Most commonly this has involved health initiatives in barbershop settings and some valuable lessons may be gleaned from this research literature (see Balls-Berry, 2015; Baker, 2012; Linan et al., 2011). Strong barber buy-in to the RDR program may alleviate some of these challenges, but an additional examination of the ways that barbershops that are successful implementers of the program is warranted. Because some barbers were less knowledgeable about the program and reported limited participation, it is important that future work examine barber's onboarding and implementation process. Future research should also examine how barbers integrate the principles highlighted in the RDR program into the services they provide fathers. Understanding how the RDR program enhances the business side of barbershops will likely prove important in ensuring the longevity of the program and increasing the quality of program implementation.

Findings from this study demonstrate that fathers also had positive views of the program but did not always report consistent implementation of book-reading strategies. Although some variation in father reported practices may relate to differences in the nature of barber implementation, findings highlight the need for additional research on fathers' successes and challenges. Previous literacy research on fathers points to the importance of father customization of instructional approaches to suit their personal interaction styles and goals (Saracho, 2008). As fathers play an important role in the learning and development of their children, understanding how to promote stronger father engagement within these settings is crucial. African-American fathers face unique racial and contextual challenges in their parenting (Tamis-LeMonda, Briggs, McClowry, & Snow, 2008). Prioritizing the voices and experiences of African-American fathers within barbershops will likely increase the impact and reach of the program.



## Limitations

As a correlational study, the research highlighted in this report is limited in important ways. First, as data were collected over the course of just a few months, findings represent a limited snapshot of barber and father experiences. Barber's and fathers' experiences may vary depending on how much exposure and time they have had in the project in ways that were not adequately captured within the time frame of this study. Second, although we took a random sample of participating sites from the larger group of RDR shops, it is possible that barbers who were more or less engaged with the project were missed as a function of randomization. Third, we experienced some general recruitment issues with father participation. These challenges involved getting fathers to participate in the study generally, as well as problems with the online survey at the beginning of the study. Although we physically visited shops and left flyers to recruit fathers, it is possible that fathers who selected to participate in the study were different from the general population of fathers who frequented the shops. Future studies should look at additional ways to obtain information about father involvement. Fourth, father and barber data were collected in isolation, limiting our ability to link these different participant pools. Because father data were anonymous in nature, we could not link fathers with specific barbershops in a manner that would allow us to associate barber implementation with father outcomes. Given all of these limitations, it is important that care be taken when generalizing findings to other barbers or fathers outside of this sample.

## Recommendations

Results from fathers' and barbers' experiences with RDR suggest many benefits of the program but also evidenced considerable variability in their perceptions, knowledge, and program implementation. The following recommendations flow from the data that was revealed from interviews and survey responses.

- **Develop and implement onboarding and messaging initiatives.** RDR implementation was strongest in barbershops that espoused a community focus. Barbershop onboarding procedures could serve to better identify and support barbers who share this mindset. Although barbershops are places of business, identifying barbers who are "community facing" appears key to ensuring that the program is being implemented in a manner that best connects with the RDR mission. Developing clear onboarding procedures and training staff to implement these approaches with fidelity will ensure that the program targets and supports barbers to engage in the program in a more meaningful and sustained way.
- **Attend to barbers' own experiences with books.** Not all barbers discussed books or their own literacy experiences in a manner that suggested that they saw reading as integral to their lives. Although these barbers espoused views about how books are important to helping children do well in school, there was considerable variability in the manner in which they told their own literacy histories. Given such variability, it is important that RDR focus on better understanding barbers' own reading habits and prior school experiences. Understanding their histories could lead to better differentiation of supports and engagement activities. In particular, RDR staff could look for evidence of barbers who reported reading infrequently or those that may have struggled themselves with reading earlier in their lives. Individualized program supports might help increase some barbers' engagement in the program and increase program impact. As some barbers articulated that African-American men may have challenges with engaging in literacy behaviors, it is important that RDR programming provide a wide range of strategies for helping barbers engage fathers in reading-related activities.
- **Support barbers' implementation of RDR by focusing on engagement strategies.** Despite positive experiences with the program, barbers wanted more support in how to engage fathers and children in



taking advantage of the little libraries. Barbers' inability to share concrete ways that they encourage father involvement with books suggests that the program could focus more explicitly on helping barbers engage fathers in conversations aimed at getting them interested in the books. Additionally, strategies could focus on helping barbers support children's direct engagement with books. Giving barbers more tools to support their engagement with fathers and children will better assist them in aligning their practices with the RDR mission. It may also make it easier to determine which barbers are implementing the program as intended.

- **Create social networks and learning communities among barbershops.** Many fathers and some barbers identified the importance of RDR marketing and engagement activities. Barbershops also discussed how they might connect with other shops to find out how they were implementing the program. It would be beneficial for RDR staff to find success stories or highlight barbers, and the strategies they used, that were demonstrating success with the program. Barbers could be leveraged as a resource for each other in learning communities. These types of social connections could help support barbers to implement the RDR program.
- **Continue to distribute books that have wide appeal and that are culturally relevant.** RDR programming should continue to focus on distributing a wide range of books that are culturally relevant to the target population. Both fathers and barbers highlighted the relevance of books as an important feature of the program. Differentiation of content might involve varied strategies for supporting children at different ages and with attention to different books.
- **Focus on strategies proven to support children's love of reading and their literacy skill.** Additional resources that support evidenced-informed practices for engaging fathers in sharing books with their children should be leveraged. Dialogic book-reading practices have been identified in the literature for supporting younger children's language and literacy knowledge. These resources could be added as a label in books in a manner that draws attention to a few things that dads might do (and barbers might encourage) to enhance their children's love of reading and their reading comprehension. Online resources exist that could support parents in understanding how to most effectively share books with children (see <http://dialogic-reading.blogspot.com/>). Two acronyms (PEER and CROWD) are used within a dialogic book-reading frame to help parents remember behaviors that support children's experiences with books. PEER is used to guide a general interaction pattern with children, while CROWD is used to help parents think about the language they might use in sharing a book. PEER stands for Prompt the child, Evaluate the child's response, Extend the response, and Repeat (experience the book a second time or review it again). CROWD stands for Completion prompts, Recall prompts, Open-ended prompts, Wh-prompts, and Distancing prompts. Additional information about both acronyms (as well as additional guidelines and resources for parents) can be found online.
- **Consider broadening the program to include mothers.** Barbers and fathers both suggested that the program could do more to engage mothers. Although the intent of RDR is to encourage male involvement in literacy, RDR staff might consider ways to engage mothers in supporting fathers. Mothers engage in considerable parenting brokering through their facilitation of male involvement in learning activities. This natural occurring brokering behavior could be better leveraged in a manner to support fathers. RDR materials should also speak to the importance of father involvement in a manner that could better engage females to support this involvement.
- **Focus on ways to increase visibility within shops.** Barbers and fathers agreed that the bookshelves could be more visible and present in a few shops. Although the location and size of the libraries are often related to the importance the shop gives the program, RDR staff might think of additional ways to make the bookshelves more engaging or appealing to patrons. Seeing what other barbers are doing with the program might assist barbers who are struggling with the placement and use of their little libraries to make program improvements.



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