

# Executive Summary: Enhancing Social Support for Low-Income Fathers

Paul Lanier, PhD  
November 2017

In response to the need to enhance fatherhood involvement in low-income families, many promising programs have been developed and implemented across the country. Several parent training and support programs have been shown to improve parent-child relationships and other parenting outcomes. However, few parenting programs have been developed and examined that are delivered specifically to fathers. The available evidence suggests that recruiting and retaining fathers in parenting programs is a challenge, but even less research has examined the effectiveness of such programs. The purpose of this study was to better understand father engagement in a parenting support program, and also to understand whether a peer-support parenting program was effective at improving outcomes for fathers.

This study was a collaborative community-university partnership between a county Community Action Agency providing Head Start/Early Head Start services (HS/EHS; WAGES), and social work

researchers at the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Social Work. This mixed methods study used a quasi-experimental randomized encouragement design to examine the effectiveness of a fathers-only peer support group delivered in a community-based Head Start setting. We implemented a widely available model, *Circle of Parents*<sup>®</sup>, a peer-support group program represented by a national network of 19 statewide and regional organizations. *Circle of Parents* is a mutual-aid program that was designed to prevent child maltreatment and strengthen families.

We recruited 102 fathers who had a child in HS/EHS and asked them to fill out a questionnaire with items relating to many father and child outcomes. Using randomization, fathers assigned to a "treatment group" were strongly encouraged to attend *Circle of Parents* group and received regular invitations and notifications of group meetings and other group activities for about a year. Fathers in the control group received usual services and were on a waitlist to join the group at the end of the study. As our

study progressed, many fathers did not receive the “treatment” they were assigned, so we also used quasi-experimental statistical methods to adjust for selection bias.

Our sample included a high proportion of African-American fathers (84%). The average age of fathers was 32 years, ranging from 19 to 66 years. The majority (77%) of fathers stated that they resided with the target child. Many fathers in our study faced significant economic challenges. Only 62 percent of fathers responded that they had worked at least 20 hours per week over the past six months and only 52 percent reported having a steady job. About a third of fathers reported receiving less than \$5,000 in income in the past year from any source.

Overall, we found very low participation and engagement in the *Circle of Parents* groups among fathers randomly assigned to receive the intervention. Less than half (40%) of fathers who received regular encouragement ever attended a single group meeting over the year of the study. There was a small group of fathers who attended consistently and were passionately involved with building up the group. However, extending the group to include a larger population of fathers with children in Head Start was not successful. Findings from qualitative interviews suggest that external barriers (i.e., work schedules), and not perceptions about the program itself, prevented most fathers from participating. Not surprisingly, given the low level of engagement in the program, we did not find many positive impacts on father outcomes, based on analysis of questionnaire responses before and after delivery of the program. Although participants did not experience improvements in social support, there was evidence that fathers who attended Circle of Parents had an increase in parenting efficacy, more



*Circle of Parents* participants at Wayne Action Group for Economic Solvency (WAGES).

concerns about child development, and a decrease in parent-child conflict.

Overall, findings of this study are consistent with prior research. Engaging fathers was extremely challenging and participation was much lower than anticipated or desired. Future efforts should explore strategies to provide more frequent and more flexible scheduling options, develop opportunities for individual or smaller-group interactions, and explore home-based or neighborhood-based group meetings.

