

Executive Summary: Fatherhood & Coparenting

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Fathers' involvement in their children's lives has received increased attention in recent years. In response, support has grown for responsible fatherhood programs aimed at improving the quantity and quality of fathers' involvement. Research on these programs has concluded that factors such as fathers' parenting skills, coparenting relationship quality, and socioeconomic status all impact fathers' ability to contribute to their children's growth and development. Using this previous research as a foundation, the 4 Your Child project seeks to integrate the provision of responsible parenting, economic stability, and relationship education services to fathers at risk for paternal disengagement. However, evaluation data indicated that many fathers had limited opportunities to apply what they learned in the project when they had to negotiate more access to their children with the custodial mothers who had not participated in the intervention. Further complicating the issue was that the Responsible Fatherhood grant funding authorization from the Office of Financial Assistance (OFA) for the 4 Your Child project prohibited the use of grant funds to target mothers for services or data collection separately without first and primarily targeting and engaging fathers in those activities. Consequently, funding from the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN) was sought to recruit the coparenting partners of 4 Your Child participants into a brief intervention featuring an educational workshop and an opportunity to receive free mediation services.

Mixed methods data were collected from a sample of 153 custodial mothers, 53.6% of 285 eligible mothers whom the research team was able to reach. The quantitative methods featured an experimental design and pre-, three-month, and six-month follow-up data collection waves. Primary outcomes included mothers' report of conflict-resolution skills, fathers' involvement with their children, and coparenting relationship quality. Quantitative data analysis revealed statistically significant main effects for intervention group mothers on conflict-resolution skills and coparenting relationship quality. The qualitative methods featured focus group data collected via verbatim audio recordings of participants' coparenting accounts and experiences. Qualitative analysis produced five emergent themes that were titled (1) What Makes a Good Dad?, (2) Coparenting Outlook, (3) Coparenting Challenges, (4) Mom's Advice for Fathers' Behavior and Program Improvement, and (5) Mothers' Reflections. Based on the quantitative and qualitative results, several recommendations are provided to practitioners and researchers interested in engaging mothers in fatherhood and coparenting interventions. These recommendations include using recruitment messaging that is likely to resonate with custodial mothers, intervening early before coparenting challenges become solidified and coparenting outlooks become pessimistic, and emphasizing the role of empathy as an area of importance to coparenting.