

# Summary Report: Fatherhood & Coparenting



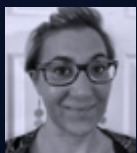
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## Introduction

Fathers' involvement in their children's lives has received increased attention in recent years (Mazza & Perry, 2017). 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, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Family Assistance (OFA), aims to integrate the provision of responsible parenting, economic stability, and relationship education services to fathers at risk for paternal disengagement. However, under the current Responsible Fatherhood grant funding authorization, separate services that target and engage mothers (where fathers are not first and primarily engaged) are not allowable grant activities. This limits the 4 Your Child participants' ability to apply the skills they learn in the program. Since coparenting relationship quality is important (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011) and influences fathers' involvement (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015), we obtained funding from FRPN to add a mothers' engagement component to 4 Your Child and test its effectiveness in impacting the coparenting alliance and fathers' involvement with their children.



## Program Description

The 4 Your Child program, based in Louisville, Kentucky, is a responsible fatherhood intervention for nonresident fathers ages 16 and up. The 4 Your Child program includes 28 hours of parent education and up to six months of case management services. The parent education component of the program contains fatherhood, parenting, and healthy relationship training delivered via group workshops featuring content from the National Fatherhood Initiative's (NFI, 2015) 24/7 Dad® A.M. curriculum. Given that a large proportion of 4 Your Child's target population, non-resident fathers, are involved in high-conflict coparenting relationships with the child's mother over custody, visitation, and/or child support, program participants also receive additional coparenting modules featuring content from the Together We Can curriculum. These workshops are co-facilitated by male-female teams with human services backgrounds and experience delivering psychoeducational material in community-based settings. In addition to the group-based responsible fatherhood, healthy relationship, and coparenting training workshops, 4 Your Child participants are also eligible to receive solution-focused case management services for up to six months.

Preliminary post intervention evaluation data revealed improvements in participants' parenting knowledge, conflict resolution, and reports of consumer satisfaction. However, the fathers also reported that in many cases, they had trouble applying what they learned in 4 Your Child because after graduating, they had to negotiate access to their child with the child's mother who had not been involved in an intervention and was engaging in gatekeeping behavior. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to pilot test a coparenting intervention aimed at increasing custodial mothers' receptivity to coparenting. The intervention consisted of two phases. The first phase consisted of a two-hour, parent-education workshop. Subsequent to completing the parent-education workshop, mothers were invited to participate in the second phase of the intervention, a coparenting session led by a court-approved mediator. The purpose of these sessions was to bring mothers and fathers together to work on mutually agreed-upon parenting plans.



## Methods

### Study Design

The study employed a mixed methods design allowing for the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data (Royse, Thyer, Padgett, & Logan, 2001). For the quantitative methods, this study utilized an experimental design featuring participants randomly assigned to either an intervention group that received the parent-education workshops and the opportunity to receive the free mediation session, or to a control group that only received a brochure with information on how mothers could improve their coparenting relationships with fathers. The qualitative data were analyzed in the phenomenological tradition. These data were related to the participants' coparenting experiences and perspectives, as well as their feedback on the intervention's strengths and weaknesses.

### Sample

Recruitment and outreach efforts yielded contact information for 353 mothers. Of this total, 21 mothers were excluded for various reasons (e.g., mother cited history of domestic violence, mother was incarcerated, or mother was not custodial parent), 47 mothers could not be reached by telephone or text (e.g., automatic message stating that telephone number was out of service or voicemail was full, resulting in the research team not being able to leave a message), leaving a possible 285 participants. Each of these mothers was given a unique identification number and was randomly assigned to either the intervention or control group using a random number calculator (graphpad.com). Of this 285, 76 mothers did not return the recruitment calls or texts. It should be noted that because the research team was able to at least leave a message for these mothers, they were distinguished from the aforementioned 47 mothers who could not be reached because their phones were either out of service or had full voicemail inboxes. Finally, 56 mothers responded and declined to participate. Therefore, the data for this study were collected from a sample of 153 mothers, 53.6% of 285 eligible mothers who the research team was able to reach. Of the 153 eligible and interested mothers, 84 were randomly assigned to the control group and 69 were randomly assigned to the intervention group.

### Procedures

Mothers assigned to the control group did not receive any services. Instead, they were simply mailed coparenting brochures that were developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative that provided tips on effective coparenting. Mothers assigned to the intervention group were invited to participate in a one-time, parent-education workshop that lasted approximately two hours. A total of 19 workshops were conducted, 12 of which were led by the first author and seven were led by the second author. It should be noted that although there was an average of 3.63 participants per workshop, nine of the workshops were individual sessions.

Immediately following each of the workshops, mothers were invited to participate in a focus group. These focus groups were facilitated by the same person who conducted the workshop and followed a semi-structured format. The proceedings were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription. Subsequent to the focus groups, mothers were offered a free coparenting session with fathers that was facilitated by the second author, a court-approved mediator. The intent of these sessions was to bring mothers and fathers together to discuss and negotiate mutually agreed-upon coparenting plans.

### Measures

The primary outcomes for this study included conflict-resolution skills, mothers report of fathers' involvement, and coparenting relationship quality. Conflict-resolution skills were measured using the Relationship Dynamics Scale (Renick et al., 1992). Mothers' report of fathers' parenting behavior was measured using the Index of Father Involvement (Hawkins et al., 2002). Mothers' report of coparenting relationship quality was measured using the Coparenting Questionnaire (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001).



## Results

Quantitative data analysis revealed that control group mothers' report of conflict-resolution skills stayed relatively stable across the three data-collection waves. However, intervention group mothers reported significantly progressively better conflict-resolution skills at each data-collection wave. As a result, there were increasingly larger differences in the control group and intervention group mothers' reports of conflict-resolution skills across the three data-collection waves. The largest of these differences occurred at the six-month follow-up.

With respect to father involvement, control group mothers reported less father involvement at each data-collection wave, with the largest drop-off occurring between the three-month and six-month data-collection waves. Conversely, intervention group mothers reported higher levels of fathers' involvement at each data-collection wave, with the largest increase occurring between the pre-intervention and three-month data-collection waves. The largest differences in the intervention and control groups' reports of fathers' involvement occurred at the six-month data-collection wave. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

For coparenting relationship quality, control group mothers reported relatively stable ratings across all three data-collection waves. However, intervention group mothers reported progressively and significantly better coparenting relationship quality ratings at each data-collection wave. As a result, there were increasingly larger differences in the control group and intervention group mothers' reports of coparenting relationship quality across the three data-collection waves. The largest of these differences occurred at the six-month follow-up data-collection wave. Table 1 displays the average ratings for each of the three primary outcome variables.

**Table 1. Average Outcome Ratings**

Variable	Study Group	Pre-	3-month	6-month
<b>Conflict Resolution</b>				
	Control	30.05	28.53	29.34
	Intervention	27.82	26.82	24.90
<b>Fathers' Involvement</b>				
	Control	82.41	81.04	76.89
	Intervention	78.65	81.88	81.93
<b>Coparenting Relationship Quality</b>				
	Control	48.47	48.71	48.27
	Intervention	50.19	51.67	53.56

### Parenting Plan/Mediation Services

Phase two of the intervention provided an opportunity for participants to receive a free coparenting session from a court-approved mediator. The intent of these sessions was to bring mothers and fathers together to establish mutually agreed-upon parenting plans established in a collaborative fashion that reflected both parents' values and desires. Of the 69 mothers participating in the parent-education workshop, only four (5.7%) agreed to participate in the facilitated parenting-plan session. Due to the small number of mothers participating in the coparenting sessions with the mediator, no further analyses were conducted on their impact.

### Qualitative Findings

Qualitative analyses of focus groups revealed five emergent themes: What Makes a Good Dad?, Coparenting Outlook, Coparenting Challenges, Mom's Advice on Fathers' Behavior and Program Improvement, and Mothers' Reflection. In



sharing their coparenting experiences, mothers stated that good fathers were those who not only prioritized financial provision, but also spent time with their children and were willing to adjust their schedules to deal with issues brought on by the obligations of parenting. The study participants expressed a range of perspectives regarding coparenting outlook; many mothers exuded optimism about the prospects of their coparenting relationship going forward based on their child's fathers' enrollment in 4 Your Child, while others remained skeptical and doubtful that meaningful change was imminent. In some cases, the mothers doubted if change was even possible. In discussing what they felt were the largest coparenting challenges, mothers shared that fathers' external factors such as incarceration and unemployment, as well as internal factors such as fathers' mental health, substance abuse, selfishness, rigidity, and other relationships, had all previously served as barriers to them establishing and maintaining high-quality relationships. When providing feedback on their participation in the mothers' workshops, participants encouraged fathers to be more effective communicators, particularly as it related to active listening. Mothers also thought that it would be important for fathers to get more firsthand exposure to what mothers endure with regard to having to put the needs of their children before their own and, in many ways, be beholden to their children's schedules. Finally, when reflecting on their experiences in the intervention and as coparents, many of the mothers acknowledged that as a result of the workshop, for the first time, they were prompted to give thought to how it is that noncustodial fathers may have experienced parenting and coparenting. Table 2 displays the emergent themes along with their associated descriptions and an illustrative quote.

**Table 2. Qualitative Themes, Descriptions, and Illustrative Quotes**

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
What makes a good dad?	Mothers discussing the traits and qualities of a good father	For me, a good father is a parent that spends a significant amount of time with their child teaching them necessary skills to be an adult, and those skills aren't necessarily physical skills, they can be emotional skills, they can be things like affirmation, teaching them good work habits and work skills, it's about teaching them how to deal with things emotionally and physically. But mostly, just putting the time in to do those things, they don't have to be perfect, but it has to be a good attempt. — 40-year-old, unmarried mother
Coparenting outlook	Mothers sharing their prognosis for their coparenting relationship	Yeah. I mean, I'm expecting that he'll complete this program and things will get better and we can begin a nice coparenting relationship versus, like I said been non-existent. So, I am hopeful in seeing how, you know, how your program makes our life have a good start. Like I said, we've already it's kind of been a good start and I've seen changes so I'm just curious to see when it's all completed, is this gonna continue? — 29-year-old, unmarried mother of two
Coparenting challenges	Mothers discussing the barriers to developing better coparenting relationships	And all he [infant child] need is time right now. You give every excuse or every reason on why you can't, when that's pointless. Like, you could manage to do everything else you want to do. Anything else you wanna try to do, you make it your possibility to do. Why can't you come and see your son or spend time with him? . . . And he got the nerve to have my baby on his Facebook page, like he daddy of the year. You wouldn't even have that picture if I didn't send it to you for Easter. — 29-year-old mother of two
Mom's advice on fathers' behavior and program improvement	Mothers providing feedback on the workshop and their thoughts on how fathers could develop better coparenting relationships	Mediation. It works for some people, for other people, it doesn't. Stress communication first and foremost. Yeah. I did stress communication. Maybe involve the children, maybe a little bit, to discuss how do you feel about your dad? Things like that. You should maybe involve the kids and bring them in and see how they feel about their daddy . . . I feel like if they hear it from their children's mouths maybe they'll change, but some people will, some people won't. — 29-year-old, unmarried mother
Mothers' Reflections	Mothers sharing how they were personally impacted by participating in the workshop.	The past four months has been amazing. We've actually . . . my father that participated in your program is the father of my youngest three. Over the course of the past four months, not only were we able to coparent, we were actually able to kind of move towards being back in the same home while raising the kids . . . Yeah. So, it was a big change for me, just because the communication became a lot better, for both of us, because I'm not necessarily perfect. Communication is one of the things that I struggle with a lot. Actually, saying what it is on my mind, and the same for him. I feel like it really made a difference to him and it's helping me tremendously. — 26-year-old, unmarried mother of four

## Recommendations for Practice

Recruitment strategies to engage mothers should emphasize the opportunity to obtain information on what fathers learn in fatherhood programs such as 4 Your Child and the important role they can play in providing input and feedback to improve the effectiveness of fatherhood programs. Programs should avoid emphasizing the potential benefits of improving mothers' coparenting knowledge and skills, since many mothers think that fathers are the only ones who need such improvement.

In an attempt to preempt the disappointment, frustration, and resentment that is oftentimes associated with dissolved romantic relationships and previously unmet expectations, it is recommended that mothers and fathers be recruited into coparenting interventions earlier in the relationship, possibly during pregnancy or shortly after birth.

Data analysis indicates that empathy plays a significant role in shaping mothers and fathers' coparenting experiences and outlooks. Therefore, interventions should place emphasis on providing parents with the necessary tools to better understand and appreciate the other parent's perspective and experience.

### Conclusion

Although definitive conclusions await future studies with larger samples and higher dosages, this study's results provide support for the notion that engaging mothers in fatherhood and coparenting interventions is feasible and can produce positive outcomes. Half (53.6%) of eligible mothers who could be reached agreed to participate. For those who participated in the coparenting intervention, favorable outcomes were found in important areas including mothers' report of conflict resolution and coparenting relationship quality. Moreover, mothers participating in the intervention expressed appreciation for the fatherhood program as, consistent with many of their own previous efforts, it was striving to encourage fathers to take a more active role in their children's lives. Finally, the role of empathy emerged as salient in shaping mothers' coparenting experiences. On one hand, several mothers lamented the fact that their children's fathers did not seem to understand or appreciate the time, effort, and energy that they as custodial parents put into providing care for their children. This lack of understanding resulted in frustration from mothers. It also led mothers to recommend developing activities and exercises that would hypothetically allow the father to "walk a mile in her shoes" so they could better understand their perspectives. On the other hand, mothers also acknowledged that participating in the workshops forced them to come to terms with the fact that they themselves had not spent much time thinking about what nonresident fathers go through or how they might experience parenting. Therefore, the results of this study represent a building block on which researchers and practitioners alike can continue their pursuit of evidence-informed interventions to positively impact family functioning.



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