

Summary Report: Enhancing Social Support for Low-Income Fathers



Paul Lanier, PhD (Principal Investigator),
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
School of Social Work

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Introduction

Several parent training and support programs have been shown to improve parent–child relationships and other parenting outcomes. However, relatively few are delivered specifically to fathers. The available evidence suggests that recruiting and retaining fathers in parenting programs is a challenge, and 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.

The Parent Support Model: *Circle of Parents*

Circle of Parents[®] is 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 had several reasons to explore *Circle of Parents* as a strategy for low-income fathers. As compared with other parenting interventions, the *Circle of Parents* model has several possible advantages: (1) the peer-support group format is low-cost in terms of program costs and burden on fathers; (2) the model is flexible and can be tailored to the specific needs of fathers; (3) the use of peer-support, with a trained facilitator, provides a private space and open environment for sharing, which fosters trust between participants, and can generate social connections beyond the intervention setting. Social support is a key protective factor for all parents and is especially important for low-income fathers.

Another aspect of *Circle of Parents* that is appealing for supporting fathers is the ability to provide groups within other public service settings, including child development and family support programs, specifically Head Start programs. Father engagement in Head Start follows the broader Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework developed by the Office of Head Start. Due to the established connection with their child's learning, as well as the familiar and regular access to a meeting space in the school setting, fathers of children enrolled in Head Start may be particularly open to engaging in *Circle of Parents* offered as part of Head Start services. There are no known studies that have examined fathers-only *Circle of Parents* programs implemented in Head Start. The first aim of our study was to examine engagement in *Circle of Parents* among fathers of children at Head Start. Our second aim was to examine whether the program had any positive impacts on father outcomes using a rigorous research design.

Study Context and Methods

For our study, *Circle of Parents* was implemented in Goldsboro, North Carolina by the Wayne Action Group for Economic Solvency (WAGES), the county's Community Action Agency and provider of many human services, including Head Start and Early Head Start (HS/EHS). First, we recruited about 100 fathers who had a child in HS/EHS and asked them to fill out a questionnaire with questions relating to many father and child outcomes. Our key outcome of interest was social support, measured using the Protective Factors Survey. In this context, social support includes informal help from family, friends, and neighbors that provides for a father's emotional and social needs. The questions on this scale ask whether fathers have someone they can talk to and who will listen when



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



they are having problems. Our hypothesis was that the *Circle of Parents* group would provide connections to this type of social support from other fathers.

We then randomly assigned fathers to a treatment and control group. Fathers in the treatment group were encouraged to attend *Circle of Parents* groups 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.

Head Start social workers offer families a range of services including resources and referrals related to employment, health and mental health, and financial planning. *Circle of Parents* groups are open-ended and participants can join and leave at any point, so estimating attendance at any given session is tricky. Nevertheless, we assumed that the one group per week that we could offer for fathers could only accommodate the 50 fathers assigned to the treatment group over the two years of the study, assuming that not all fathers would come every week, and that there would be a legitimate need to waitlist fathers for a future iteration of the program and thereby generate a control group. As it turned out, the weekly *Circle of Parents* groups were very sparsely attended. Due to the low rate of attendance, our team did not turn away any fathers from the waitlist group who wanted to attend meetings. Since many fathers in our study did not receive the “treatment” to which they were assigned randomly and the original experimental design was compromised, we used quasi-experimental statistical methods to estimate the effects of the program.

Father Participants

Participants were recruited from WAGES, and were fathers of young children (zero to five years) receiving HS/EHS services. Our sample included a high proportion of African-American fathers (84%). The age of fathers ranged from 19 to 66 years ($M = 32$, $SD = 11$). The majority (77%) of fathers stated that they resided with the target child at baseline, and 53 percent reported more than three children lived in their house. Of the fathers in the sample at baseline ($n = 102$), about 16 percent had less than a high school diploma, 46 percent had a high school diploma or GED, and 38 percent had at least some college. 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 (34%) of fathers reported receiving less than \$5,000 income in the past year from any source.



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

Main Findings

Overall, we found very low participation and engagement in the *Circle of Parents* groups among fathers randomly assigned to receive the intervention. As a voluntary program, we could only encourage fathers to attend and our team attempted many strategies to incentivize and promote participation. However, less than half (40%) of fathers who received regular encouragement ever attended even one meeting. A small group of six fathers attended meetings very often (10 or more meetings, 11%), and other fathers had infrequent attendance (5–9 meetings, 6%; 2–4 meetings, 13%; 1 meeting, 11%). Further, about 25 percent of the fathers who were randomized to the control condition (waitlist, no encouragement) attended at least one group meeting. This difference was not statistically significant, indicating that the reminders, encouragement, and incentives did not impact engagement in *Circle of Parents* for fathers in our study.



There was a small group of about five 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. We conducted qualitative interviews with 12 fathers to learn more about their thoughts about participation in the program. All fathers we talked to reported strong interest and positive perceptions of the program; they liked the idea of having a group of peers they could talk to about being a father. However, they told us that their work schedules and other practical barriers limited their ability to participate. We also found that fathers who had a young child (<1 year old) and those who did not hold steady jobs were more likely to participate. Although most fathers in the Circle evaluation were not involved in other parent activities at Head Start, there was limited evidence that fathers who attended *Circle of Parents* tended to be fathers who were also involved in other parent involvement activities at Head Start.

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. Social support did not improve for fathers. However, we found modest evidence that parenting self-efficacy increased, or the feeling of competence in a parenting role, as did concerns about child development, suggesting greater awareness of child development issues. At the same time, there were modest reductions in parent-child conflict reported by fathers who participated in *Circle of Parents*. Although disappointing, the results of this study indicate that a weekly peer support group, such as *Circle of Parents*, is not likely to engage most low-income fathers in a Head Start setting, and, without sufficient engagement, positive outcomes will not be realized.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether fathers with children in Head Start would engage in a peer support program. If so, this study also sought to determine whether participation in the program improved social support, father-child relationships, and other important outcomes. Prior research indicates that engaging fathers in parenting support services and parent involvement programs is a challenge. To address some of the barriers to engagement, we implemented *Circle of Parents*, a promising program that emphasizes mutual aid and peer support. Overall, findings of this study are consistent with prior research. Engaging fathers was extremely challenging, and participation was much lower than anticipated or desired.

Additionally, the results of this study do not indicate strong support for the effectiveness of this model in improving outcomes for fathers or their children. Although fathers indicated that they found the program acceptable, our results indicate that participation in the support group does not yield a significant positive return above usual Head Start services. Our findings suggest that there may be an increase in parenting self-efficacy, an important outcome for this population. But, this program did not improve social support, which is hard to impact if fathers are unable to consistently be in the room with their peers for these meetings.

The enthusiasm and excitement of the small group of engaged fathers is certainly an untapped resource that likely exists in many Head Start contexts. However, this study and this intervention were not able to successfully empower and partner with these fathers in a way that allowed them to be successful in their outreach. 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. More formative research may be needed to understand how to increase demand among fathers by providing services that fit their specific schedules as well as their needs and desires as a father.

