

Executive Summary: Testing the Feasibility of an Interactive, Mentor-Based, Text Messaging Program to Increase Fathers' Engagement in Home Visitation

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The Text4Dad program was implemented as an add-on module in conjunction with a larger, multi-site fatherhood program, called the Healthy Start Engaged Father program, which uses a home visiting intervention to increase father involvement. The larger, multi-site evaluation examines the implementation of the Engaged Father program, delivered by fatherhood Community Health Workers (F-CHWs), in Healthy Start home visitation programs in urban and rural areas in Michigan. Text4Dad was implemented in three of the six Healthy Start Engaged Father program sites in a 16-month implementation evaluation study funded by the Fatherhood Research Practice Network (FRPN).

Text4Dad is a text messaging program to facilitate communication, interaction, and social support between F-CHWs and the clients on their caseload. The clients enrolled in Text4Dad are low-income fathers with at least one young child, most of whom were participants in the Healthy Start Engaged Father program. The FRPN pilot study evaluation of Text4Dad had two primary objectives. First, the team examined the process of implementing Text4Dad in community settings. A key question was whether the F-CHWs would use Text4Dad, and, if so, to what degree it would be beneficial in supplementing the home visiting and group-based programs carried about by the F-CHWs. To examine this objective, the research team conducted interviews with F-CHWs and fathers who used Text4Dad to understand how well the content of Text4Dad met their needs as community health workers and program participants.

Second, the team examined the usage of Text4Dad. To carry out this objective, the team conducted content analysis of the exchanges between F-CHWs and fathers to better understand the topics that are most important and engaging to men.

There are several conclusions from this short-term implementation evaluation. First, the F-CHWs found Text4Dad relatively easy to use. Second, the F-CHWs used Text4Dad to push out content to fathers on a weekly basis. Third, both the F-CHWs and fathers had positive views of Text4Dad content and felt the content was acceptable and relevant to their parenting experiences. Overall, the data suggested that Text4Dad could be implemented in community fatherhood programs, and qualitative data supported the notion that Text4Dad helped fathers stay connected to and engaged with the fatherhood program (e.g., scheduling and rescheduling appointments, staying up to date on community-based events).

Although Text4Dad was viewed to be useful and relatively easy to use, F-CHWs nevertheless required ongoing technical assistance and support from the University of Michigan (UM) research team. Although the F-CHWs used Text4Dad to push out information to fathers, there was a lower than expected level of interactivity or mentorship between the F-CHWs and fathers through Text4Dad. Content analysis of exchanges indicated that, even with coaching from the UM research team, for the most part the F-CHWs did not use Text4Dad to elicit information or interaction with fathers. Only one of the three F-CHWs used the program to provide interactive support or encouragement to fathers. In follow-up interviews, two F-CHWs indicated that they felt that social support was more appropriately delivered during the in-home visitation components of the program. One important step moving forward from the FRPN pilot study is to consider how to support the F-CHWs to fully implement the mentorship and social support components of Text4Dad. More intensive initial training in the theory and rationale of Text4Dad may be necessary to accomplish this goal.

