

# Summary Report: A Randomized Controlled Trial of the Effectiveness of a Responsible Fatherhood Program: The Case of TYRO Dads



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## Background

The past three decades have witnessed a growing cultural consensus on fathers' role in families: fathers need to provide not only financial but also emotional support for their children. Despite the growing number of responsible fatherhood programs, including those funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), only a few of them have been evaluated for effectiveness based on experimental design, known to be the best scientific approach for program evaluation research. When programs are evaluated by non-experimental or quasi-experimental study without using a proper control group, the validity of findings from such evaluation is often questionable and subject to various criticisms.



TYRO Dads participants and staff.

We conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate a program called TYRO Dads, thereby contributing to evaluation research on fatherhood programs in several ways. First, we examine whether attending the TYRO Dads program increases two primary outcomes: the frequency of fathers doing things with their child (or, in short, father-child activities) and their satisfaction with parenting their child (or, in short, parenting satisfaction). Second, we investigate whether differences in the primary outcomes between treatment and control group are attributable to four secondary outcomes of the program: fathers' parenting efficacy, parenting role identity, perceived challenges in parenting, and perception of coparenting relationship with their child's mother. Third, we focus on low-income fathers, unlike previous researchers who mostly studied middle- to high-income fathers. Fourth, we consider the impact of program dosage, or the number of classes fathers attend, on the primary outcomes of father-child activities and parenting satisfaction. Finally, we conducted a three-wave panel study of pre-test, post-test, and three-month follow-up surveys to compare treatment and control group in terms of changes in the primary and secondary outcomes, whereas prior longitudinal research tends to be based on two-wave panel design.

## Intervention

TYRO Dads is a 20-hour course delivered in 10 two-hour sessions over a five-week period. Ron and Catherine Tijerina, co-founders and Co-Executive Directors of the RIDGE Project, created the curriculum based on their personal experience with Ron's 15-year incarceration. The RIDGE Project has been implementing TYRO Dads since 2006. Before facilitating the TYRO Dads curriculum, all class facilitators are required to complete a 16-hour training to learn how to deliver workshops effectively to participants. Class facilitators use a detailed instructional manual to present the lessons and activities in each workshop. Participants complete a workbook with key points and questions to be answered for each workshop, space for notes, workshop exercises, and a list of homework assignments.

The TYRO program is built on the premise that when a father embraces the importance of his fatherhood role, he is motivated to change and do what is right for his children and family. The program is designed to awaken fathers to the harmful impact of their past behaviors on their children and families and to help fathers recognize and change the underlying thinking patterns that have contributed to their decisions and behaviors that have negatively impacted their relationships with their children. While encouraging fathers to accept responsibility for their poor choices in the past, it also provides new ways of thinking that provide hope for a successful future.



TYRO Dads culminates with a completion ceremony that recognizes and affirms the father's progress in terms of changed attitude by conferring the title of TYRO and giving the father a TYRO pin. This ceremony reinforces the father's new identity as a man of honor and integrity who embraces his role as father and is committed to doing what is right for his children and family. TYROs are further encouraged to join the TYRO Alumni Community (TAC) for ongoing support, encouragement, and accountability. Fathers who attend eight of the 10 TYRO Dads classes receive a certificate of completion that often enables them to access Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding for certain types of training such as the Commercial Driver's License (CDL). Those who complete the TYRO Dads program also receive case management services to connect them to community services (e.g., legal aid, substance abuse counseling, etc.) needed to help them overcome challenges to employment and developing healthy and stable family relationships.

## Research Design

Eligibility criteria for study participants included being male, 18 years old or older, a father of at least one biological child under the age of 19, and having household income at or below 200 percent of the 2014 federal poverty level (\$47,700 for a family of four). The study participants were recruited from a variety of settings in eight cities in Ohio (Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton, Lima, Mansfield, Toledo, and Wooster), including child support enforcement agencies, job and family services, organizations serving individuals with mental/behavioral health needs, organizations serving individuals with drug and/or alcohol addiction, probation and parole, courts, reentry coalitions, Head Start, and one-stop employment agencies.<sup>1</sup>

At those organizations, flyers and sign-up forms for this study were posted along with TYRO Dads applications. Individuals interested in participating in this study sent their completed application and sign-up form to the RIDGE headquarters office. RIDGE regional offices screened applicants and emailed a list of those who were eligible for the study to the principal investigator for randomization.



TYRO Dads participants and staff.

The researchers randomly assigned applicants eligible for the study to treatment and control groups. A list of random assignment then was emailed to the RIDGE program coordinator, who distributed it to class facilitators at 17 research sites in the nine cities. The class facilitators and all eligible applicants were blinded to the randomization, and RIDGE headquarters trained all the facilitators for research procedure including survey administration.

All applicants eligible for the study were notified via mail of the time and location of informational meeting, and class facilitators administered baseline, pre-test survey to them when they came to the meeting at each site. After completing the pre-test survey, participants assigned to the treatment group attended the first session of TYRO Dads, whereas those assigned to the control group attended the informational meeting and left after completing the pre-test. Post-test survey was also administered by the class facilitators to treatment group fathers when they came to the last session of TYRO Dads, whereas a trained interviewer called those absent on the last day of program and asked them to complete the post-test on the phone. The interviewer also called control group fathers to conduct post-test telephone survey. Approximately three months after





TYRO Dads participants and staff.

the post-test survey, an interviewer called all fathers of both groups and asked them to participate in the final, follow-up survey by telephone.

We expected the following:

- Treatment group fathers were more likely than control group fathers to be satisfied with their parenting and to increase the frequency of father-child activities over a four-month period of study.
- Treatment group fathers were likely to report higher levels of parenting efficacy, parenting role identity, and perception of coparenting relationship and lower levels of perceived challenges in parenting compared to control group fathers over the study period.
- The expected differences in fathers' parenting satisfaction and the frequency of father-child activities were likely to be attributable in part to the differences in fathers' parenting efficacy, parenting role identity, and perception of coparenting relationship.
- The TYRO Dads program tended to have larger effects on fathers' parenting satisfaction and the frequency of father-child activities among fathers who lived with their child than those who did not and smaller effects when fathers perceived more rather than fewer challenges in parenting.

The survey included multiple items measuring each of the program's primary (parenting satisfaction and the frequency of father-child activities) and secondary outcomes (parenting efficacy, parenting role identity, perception of coparenting relationship, and perceived challenges), and the items were averaged to construct a composite measure of each outcome based on statistical analysis. Information about fathers' criminal backgrounds and probation status as well as sociodemographic characteristics was obtained from fathers' applications for TYRO Dads.

## Data Collection

Slightly more than 10 percent (56) of 525 fathers recruited failed to meet the eligibility criteria for study participation, so 469 applicants eligible for the study were randomly assigned to control and treatment groups, 212 and 257, respectively. Of the 469 randomized, 252 fathers (115 in the control group and 137 in the treatment group) completed the pre-test survey. A total of 177 (90 in the control group and 87 in the treatment group) of the 252 participated in the post-test survey, whereas 140 fathers (59 in the control group and 81 in



the treatment group) completed the follow-up survey. About 48 percent (120) of the 252 fathers completed all three surveys, whereas the remaining 132 fathers did only one or two.

Attrition from the randomization to the pre-test (46.3%) was more than twice as high as what was anticipated (20%), while subsequent attrition became smaller, 29.8 percent (from the pre-test to the post-test) and 20.9 percent (from the post-test to the follow-up). RIDGE program staff attributed the high rate of pre-assessment attrition to the fact that many eligible fathers were reluctant to participate in the study and risk being assigned to the control group. As previously noted, fathers who completed eight or the 10 TYRO Dads classes were eligible for attractive WIOA-funded training programs. Members of the control group for this study could not attend the program classes until the study concluded.

Another issue with attrition was that while it was initially similar between control (45.8%) and treatment groups (46.7%), it became different over time. At the post-test survey, it was 21.7 percent versus 36.5 percent for the treatment and control groups, respectively. And at the three-month follow-up, it was 34.4 percent versus 6.9 percent, respectively. Despite our concerns about high and differential levels of attrition, our extensive analysis revealed that the two groups were essentially equivalent. Difference-of-means tests showed that participants and non-participants of each survey were generally similar in terms of sociodemographic and criminal backgrounds except that participants tended to be older, have been married but are now divorced, and live with someone they did not marry.

More importantly, the control and treatment groups were found to be not significantly different in those characteristics when they participated in each survey with only two minor exceptions: treatment group fathers tended to be married at the pre-test and live with more people in the same household than control group fathers. In sum, despite the high attrition, randomization-generated equivalence between control and treatment groups remained generally intact, as the dropouts and non-participation were not systematic but random and thus did not compromise the integrity of the study.

## Findings

### Quantitative Findings

We conducted analysis (called latent trajectory or growth curve modeling) that enabled us to examine a linear trajectory (which is latent in that it is not observed directly) of an outcome variable based on the variable's repeated measures at the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. Results from the analysis showed that:

The more sessions fathers attended, the more likely parenting satisfaction was to increase across the three surveys. Particularly, those who attended eight or more sessions were more likely to reap the benefit of TYRO Dads than not only control group fathers but also other treatment group fathers—that is, those who attended fewer than eight sessions.

The trajectory of the frequency of father-child activities was initially found to be no different between control and treatment groups. However, the TYRO Dads program was found to increase the frequency, depending on whether the program enhanced fathers' sense of self-efficacy in parenting (i.e., parenting efficacy), perception of coparenting relationship with the child's mother, and perceived importance of father's role in parenting (i.e., role identity).

- Fathers' parenting efficacy, perception of coparenting relationship, and role identity tended to improve over the four-month period among treatment group fathers compared to control group fathers.
- On the other hand, fathers' perceived challenges in parenting did not change differently between the control and treatment groups, indicating that TYRO Dads had no observable effect on those attributes.



- Fathers' parenting efficacy, coparenting relationship, and role identity explained why treatment group fathers reported increasing satisfaction with parenting their child and the frequency of father-child interactions—that is, TYRO Dads helped those fathers improve their parenting efficacy, perception of coparenting relationship with the child's mother, and role identity, which in turn contributed to their parenting satisfaction and the frequency of father-child activities.
- Program dosage also helped to explain positive outcomes.
  - The increase in parenting efficacy, perception of coparenting relationship, and parenting satisfaction were all positively related to number of sessions attended—that is, the more sessions fathers attended, the greater increase in the positive outcomes they reported.
  - A threshold for the treatment effect was detected when we examined four levels of dosage (number of sessions): no (zero sessions), low (one to four sessions), medium (five to seven sessions), and high dosage (eight to 10 sessions). The threshold was found to be eight, which coincided with the minimum requirement for the completion of TYRO Dads Program—that is, the increase in positive outcomes was observed only among fathers who attended the RIDGE-required minimum eight sessions of TYRO Dads or more (up to 10). Among the high-dosage group fathers, parenting efficacy helped improve parenting satisfaction, whereas fathers' role identity contributed to an increase in the frequency of father-child activities.
- While fathers' perceived challenges in parenting did not affect the effectiveness of TYRO Dad, their residential status did—that is, nonresidential fathers tended to reap greater benefit from participating in TYRO Dads than their residential counterparts.

## Qualitative Findings

We conducted phone interviews with two regional directors and one facilitator of the RIDGE Project to supplement our quantitative finding, specifically, to probe reasons for variation in class attendance rates. Our quantitative analysis showed the importance of attending at least eight of 10 sessions of TYRO Dads, but only half of treatment group fathers attended five or more sessions. Therefore, we asked staff why some fathers attended the class more often than others.

The directors and facilitator tended to attribute the difference in attendance to variation in individual motivation and needs—that is, in terms of motivation and commitment, they said some individuals were more “ready” than others to complete TYRO Dads. One of them also pointed out the importance of maturity.

Besides individual motivation, they also mentioned structural obstacles. For example, many fathers eligible for TYRO Dads could not attend sessions offered during the daytime because they were only available in the evenings. Those at both halfway house and non-halfway house locations were often out looking for jobs during the day. Those not living in halfway houses who work during the daytime could not come to TYRO Dads because of their work schedule.

Another interesting finding was that there were more challenges in getting fathers to attend TYRO Dads classes when fathers were not in halfway houses. These fathers, for example, may have had transportation barriers to attending or had to start a new job after being found eligible for services. By contrast, those living in halfway houses were much more accessible to RIDGE staff, who encourage fathers to attend scheduled sessions. In some halfway houses, RIDGE staff were able to have some face-to-face contact with eligible fathers before or between scheduled sessions. This contact was not possible for those who did not live in halfway houses.



## Implications For Practice

Our study has the following implications for the practice of fatherhood programs:

- Fathers' coparenting relationship with the child's mother is a key to improving their parenting of the child. Therefore, fatherhood programs need to focus on how to improve parenting alliance between the child's father and mother.
- Not surprisingly, frequent participation and completion of fatherhood programs are crucial to participating fathers reaping the benefit of the program. Therefore, fatherhood programs need to develop effective ways not only keep fathers in the program but also have them participate as much as possible. For the latter, it is worth considering offering make-up sessions to those who miss a class.
- The ability to access WIOA-funded job training programs may have led many eligible fathers to pass up the opportunity to participate in the study and risk being assigned to the control group. Thus, fatherhood programs might want to consider exploring similar job training and work incentives to motivate fathers to enroll.
- To reduce attrition between randomization and baseline assessment, the initial assessment should be done relatively soon after random assignment is completed.
- While further research is needed, it seems that the effect of fatherhood program does not depend on whether fathers live with their child. Thus, practitioners should not have low expectation for non-residential fathers participating in a fatherhood program.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Slightly more than half (53.3%, n=104) of 195 study participants for whom we had information about whether they were on parole or living in a halfway house at the time of pre-test were neither on parole nor living in a halfway house, whereas 12.8 percent were parolees living in a halfway house, with 33.8 percent being either (i.e., 20.5% not on parole and living in a halfway house and 13.3% on parole not living in a halfway house).

