

Self-reported personal challenges of fathers in responsible fatherhood programs

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Overview

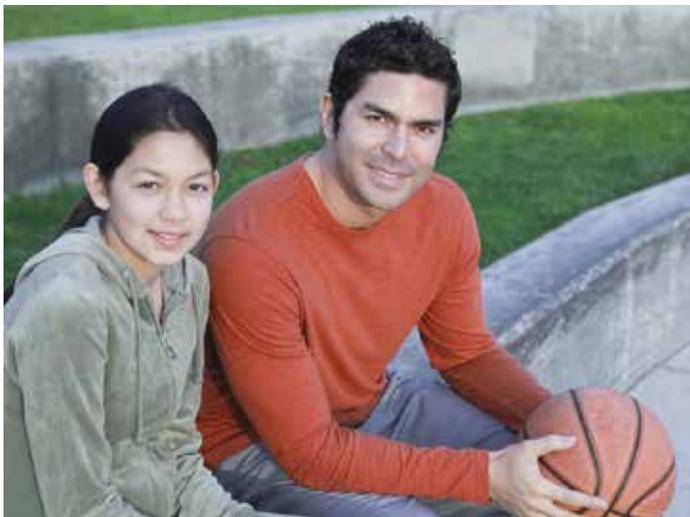
Challenges (also referred to as risk factors or barriers) have been defined as conditions that hinder a consistent pattern of positive behavior and wellbeing (Fraser, 2004). The types of challenges experienced by fathers in responsible fatherhood programs (e.g., incarceration) are often substantial and may be strongly associated with lower levels of father involvement with children and lower quality coparenting relationships with mothers. Waller and Swisher (2006) suggest that fathers with many personal challenges may passively withdraw from being involved with their children. These men may have too many problems of their own to become involved with their young child. Fathers with many challenges also may experience more parenting stress, which tends to be negatively related to father engagement with children (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, & Carrano, 2010). It has been suggested that mothers also select out of relationships they perceive to be “unhealthy” because they view these fathers as having little to

offer their children. For example, qualitative research with low-income unmarried, non-residential fathers showed that mothers want their baby’s father to be involved with the child, but only if the father does not have too many problems of his own and can provide for his children (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008). It has been suggested also that high levels of father challenge during the child’s early years may have long-term negative effects on later paternal engagement with children (Fagan & Lee, 2012). Fathers may have a difficult time recovering from the negative effects of their risk as the child grows older because they have not been able to form early bonds with the child or because their relationship with the mother was poor.

Although the research literature has shown negative effects of low income fathers’ challenges on paternal involvement with children, there is little available information about the types of challenges that fathers enrolled in responsible fatherhood programs experience.

Data about the types of challenges experienced by these fathers would be helpful to programs that plan services to meet the needs of their clientele. This brief report addresses this gap by presenting descriptive data about the types and severity of fathers' challenges.

For this study, we recruited participants from 9 different fatherhood programs in 5 northeastern U.S. cities that serve low-income, primarily unmarried nonresidential fathers. Approximately 5-15 fathers were recruited from each program to participate in this study. To participate in the study, the fathers had to: (1) be a nonresidential,



biological father to a child under the age of 18, and (2) be enrolled in a responsible fatherhood program serving low income fathers. For the purpose of this research, nonresidence was defined as not living in the same household with at least one of their children all or most of the time. Across the 9 fatherhood programs we recruited 71 fathers who completed the quantitative survey. Data were not available to determine if the fathers who participated in this study were representative of fathers across the 9 programs.

Participant characteristics

Table 1 describes the characteristics of study participants. Fathers ranged in level of educational achievement: nearly 20% reported less than a high

school diploma, around 45% of the sample reported having a high school diploma or GED, nearly 30% had some college or a college degree, and a little more than 5% had a graduate degree. The majority were single and never married (n = 53), African-American (n = 41), and reported an income of less than \$10,000 before taxes and deductions (n = 38). Nearly 36% reported working in a steady job, 21.4% reported working in a non-steady job, and 33.8% were unemployed. Half of the participants (50%) were looking for work, and a smaller percentage (20%) were in school or in a training program. On average men had 2 biological children, and few had non-biological children. A little more than a third of the fathers reported living with their youngest child, and a little more than a fifth reported living with their second youngest child. On average fathers reported spending more nights with their youngest child (M = 12 nights per month), than they spent with their second youngest child (M = 10.4 nights per month).

Instrument

The 23-item personal challenges questionnaire, developed by the researchers for this study, was used to measure participants' personal challenges and the intensity of each respective challenge. Participants were asked to consider possible challenges they may have experienced in the last thirty days and to "share how much of an impact it has had on you". Participants ranked the degree of the challenge on a three point Likert-type scale, in which response choices were 0 through 3 (0 corresponding to a little, 1 corresponding to somewhat, and 2 corresponding to a great deal). Sample items included: "Have you had a problem with unemployment in the last thirty days?" and "Have you had a problem with not having enough money for food?"

Results

On average fathers reported a total of 6.83 challenges in the last thirty days (see Table 2). Participants reported a wide range in the total number of challenges they experienced. Four participants



reported zero challenges, while one participant reported 23 challenges. Table 2 provides a full account of the descriptive statistics for fathers' challenges organized in order from challenges most frequently reported, to those least frequently reported as a challenge. Table 2 also indicates the percentage of fathers who reported the challenge as both relevant to them, and posing a great deal of a problem.

Unemployment was the personal challenge most frequently reported by fathers. Almost 65% of the sample reported unemployment as a challenge in the last thirty days and 46% reported that this challenge posed a great deal of a problem to them. Other frequently reported challenges included: insufficient funds to buy things for one's child(ren) (64.8%), an inability to pay child support (35.2%), difficulty keeping a job (32.4%), and inability to pay bills (30.4%). Slightly less than one-third of the sample felt their living situation prevented them from having their children over, and a similar number reported physical health problems. Approximately 27% of fathers indicated having problems dealing with family/civil court, and of these fathers, 26% said that these legal issues pose a great deal of a problem to them. About one-fifth of fathers reported having problems with anger, a history of being accused of abusing one's partner/spouse, and drug/alcohol problems. Less frequently reported challenges included: an overcrowded home (11.3%), the court not supporting the father's visits with his children (9.9%), and having a child in foster care (5.6%).

Discussion

There is currently very little published information available about the characteristics and challenges of fathers who attend responsible fatherhood programs. Although the data presented in this brief report are based on a small sample of fathers, this is one of the first reports to provide information about participants from a number of such programs (we interviewed fathers in 9 programs). The findings reveal that unemployment and

financial problems are the most frequently identified challenges. Moreover, these challenges often pose a great deal of a problem for fathers. It is very possible that fathers are drawn to responsible fatherhood programs primarily because they want assistance with employment and child support. A substantial number of fathers also reported having problems with housing that prevents them from spending time with their child. These findings suggest the importance of providing case management services to fathers as a means to assist with housing challenges.

Other challenges such as anger management and a history of abusing one's partner/spouse are reported less frequently than employment, child support, and housing challenges, although challenges with emotional and behavior problems are still reported by a substantial proportion (one-fifth) of the fathers in this study. It is clear that programs will need to be able to offer services to fathers that can assist them with emotional and behavior problems, as these problems may have significant negative consequences for being involved with one's child. Assistance with legal issues and problems with family court are



reported by about one-quarter of fathers, suggesting that programs will need to be prepared to offer these services, but perhaps to a lesser degree than employment and child support assistance. Fathers also infrequently reported challenges associated with the mother of his children having a new partner.

The findings of this small-scale study may be useful to programs and practitioners that are charged with being responsive to the needs of fathers. One of the challenges for programs will be to offer high quality employment and job-related services that can assist fathers to address significant challenges with work and financial independence. Although all federally funded responsible fatherhood programs must provide employment services to fathers, many have low success rates in helping fathers to secure jobs. The reasons for low job placement rates may be related to a combination of the state of the economy in communities where fathers reside as well as low education and job readiness skills of fathers (as well as a history of incarceration). Nonetheless, programs will need to continue to develop and refine their employment services so that fathers can obtain the help that they identify as their greatest challenge.

Implications For Programs

- Employment, child support, and inability to financially support children are fathers' most frequently reported challenges. These should be a high priority among the services offered by fatherhood programs.
- Housing problems and difficulty managing one's own anger are frequently reported by fathers and should be addressed through case management and counseling services.

Implications For Researchers

- Researchers conducting evaluations of fatherhood programs should assess a range of challenges or risk factors. These challenges may moderate the effects of the fatherhood intervention/program on father and family outcomes.

References

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Table 1
Demographic characteristics of study sample (N=71)

	n	%	M (SD)
Age of father (years)*	-	-	36.97 (9.29)
Education			
Less than High School	14	19.7	-
High school/GED	32	45.1	-
Some college	13	18.3	-
2 year college degree	3	4.2	-
4 year college degree	5	7.0	-
Graduate degree	4	5.6	-
Marital status			
Single, never married	53	74.6	-
Married	6	8.5	-
Separated	5	7.0	-
Divorced	6	8.5	-
Widowed	1	1.4	-
Employment**			
Working a steady job	25	35.7	-
Working a non-steady job	15	21.4	-
Unemployed	24	33.8	-
Looking for work	35	50	-
In school/training program	14	20	-
Income*** (before taxes/deductions)			
Less than \$5,000	21	37.5	-
\$5,001 to \$10,000	17	30.4	-
\$10,001 to \$15,000	7	12.5	-
\$15,001 to \$20,000	3	5.4	-
\$20,001 to \$25,000	4	7.1	-
More than \$25,001	4	7.2	-

Race	n	%	M (SD)
Asian, Pacific Islander	1	1.4	-
Black, African-American	41	57.7	-
White	5	7.0	-
Multiracial	4	5.6	-
Other	12	16.9	-
Children			
# of biological children	-	-	2.18 (1.32)
# of non-biological children	-	-	.49 (1.07)
Age of youngest child (years)	-	-	7.88 (6.66)
Youngest child lives with participant	26	36.6	-
Age of 2nd youngest child (years)****	-	-	12.69 (7.91)
2nd youngest child lives with participant****	16	22.5	-
# of nights youngest child spent with father in past month	-	-	12.00 (13.02)
# of nights 2nd youngest child spent with father in past month****	-	-	10.40 (13.45)

*n=71; **father could select more than one option; ***n=56; ****n=45.



	Challenge		Severity*	
	n	%	n	%
Unemployment	46	64.8	33	46.5
I don't have enough money to buy things for my child(ren)	46	64.8	14	30.4
Unable to pay bills	35	49.3	14	40.0
Not having a steady place to live	32	45.1	18	45.1
Unable to pay child support	25	35.2	14	56.0
Keeping a job when I have one	23	32.4	14	60.9
Physical health problems	23	32.4	6	26.1
My living situation prevents having my children over	22	31.0	16	72.7
Live too far from my children	19	26.8	8	42.1
I don't know how to deal with family/civil court	19	26.8	5	26.3
Problems with the law	17	23.9	11	64.7
Incarceration	17	23.9	11	23.9
I work too many hours	16	22.5	3	18.8
Drug/alcohol use	15	21.1	8	53.3
I was accused of being violent toward my partner	15	21.1	7	46.7
My home needs major repairs	15	21.1	1	6.7
I have difficulty controlling my anger	15	21.1	5	33.3
Accused of neglecting/abusing my child(ren)	10	14.1	6	60.0
The child(ren)'s mother has a new partner who does not want me around	10	14.1	5	50.0
There is a protection order against me	9	12.7	7	77.8
My home is overcrowded	8	11.3	3	37.5
The court does not support me visiting my child(ren)	7	9.9	3	42.9
The child is in foster care	4	5.6	3	75.0
Total Challenges, M, SD, range	6.83	4.85	0-23	

*Severity indicates the percentage of fathers who indicated that the challenge is both relevant to them and the challenge poses a great deal of a problem.

