

Executive Summary: Evaluating Mother and Nonresidential Father Engagement in Coparenting Services in a Fatherhood Program

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Many low-income, non-custodial fathers desire to be good fathers but face significant barriers stemming from a weak or highly conflicted relationship with their child's mother. In addition, many mothers and fathers have poor affect regulation and communication skills, which significantly impede coparenting and can negatively impact the child through exposure to destructive parental conflict. Improving coparenting between low-income, non-residential fathers and the mother of their child, therefore, is an important step toward increasing father involvement and thereby improving child outcomes. However, little is known about how to improve coparenting in this population.

To address these issues, we developed an "enhanced coparenting service" to be offered through the Talbert House Fatherhood Project

in Cincinnati, Ohio. It focuses on recruiting, engaging, and retaining mothers by conveying empathy for her situation and potential reservations about participating, addressing maternal issues such as lingering relationship pain, and offering individual and groups services for mothers. In this research project, we originally aimed to evaluate the enhanced coparenting service; however, we experienced ongoing challenges with recruitment into services. We therefore revised the study aims to best make use of the data we had and to focus on exploring the reasons why it was so difficult to recruit fathers or mothers into coparenting services. To accomplish this, we (1) examined characteristics of 97 nonresidential fathers participating in a fatherhood program, (2) examined possible predictors of father engagement in coparenting services for



these 97 fathers, and (3) identified barriers to engagement in coparenting services for both nonresidential fathers and the mothers of their children based on interviews with 16 mothers and 30 fathers.

Not surprising was that study fathers reported significant challenges in their relationships with the mother of their child. Specifically, they reported high levels of maternal undermining of their parenting attempts, little to no positive coparenting alliance, and destructive communication behaviors between themselves and the child's mother. These same difficulties and conflict in their relationship with the child's mother were the most robust predictors of father participation in coparenting services. Qualitative interviews with both mothers and

fathers revealed that nonresidential fathers and the mother of their child both appeared to largely view coparenting services as valuable even though engagement in coparenting services was low. This indicates that low perceived value of services was not a driver of low uptake of services.

Themes from the interviews suggest that the primary drivers to low engagement in coparenting services were the poor quality of the relationship between the coparents, the mother's distrust of the Fatherhood Project to represent her interests, practical barriers such as busy schedules and perceived inconvenience of the location, lack of formalized and systematic staff communication/ outreach protocols, and a need for more effective advertising of the existence and intent of the coparenting services.

