

Attendance in Community-Based Fatherhood Programs

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This brief addresses the problem of low attendance in programs for low-income fathers. We review approaches to measuring attendance, rates of attendance reported by programs, influences on attendance, the effects of attendance on fathers' outcomes, and future directions for improving attendance and studying it.

Measuring Attendance and Rates of Attendance

Attendance has been measured in multiple ways, including number of classes or sessions attended, number of overall hours of workshop attendance, number of hours of participation in specific content areas, number of modules completed, number of service activities in which fathers participate, and completion of the program or rates of graduation. Since the length of programs differs, the number of sessions or hours in which fathers are expected to attend varies. Our search revealed programs that ranged from a five-hour financial literacy program offered in a single, same-day format to noncustodial parents in the child support program in Memphis, Tennessee (Davis et al., 2014) to a parenting program for fathers in Denver, Colorado, consisting of two-hour parenting classes over 13 weeks for a total of 32 hours (Classes, 2018). The National Fatherhood Initiative 24/7 Dad© curriculum, which is one of the most widely used curricula in the United States, consists of 12 two-hour sessions for a total of 24 hours.

While the average level of sessions or hours attended is useful for understanding the raw number or the proportion of sessions fathers attend, means are influenced by extremes and may obscure the fact that some fathers attend very few or no sessions, whereas others attend many sessions. Alternatively, attendance can

be divided into categories such as low, medium, and high or none, partial, and full. Attendance categories permit researchers to compare the effects of the program like father engagement with children or child support payment across different levels of attendance.

Fatherhood program evaluations that report rates of attendance suggest great variation. For example:

- The PACT evaluation reported that 57 to 72 percent of fathers attended at least one session across programs, whereas 21 to 59 percent of fathers attended one-half or more of sessions (Zaveri, Baumgartner, Dion, & Clary, 2015).
- The Center for Urban Families (CFUF) evaluation found that fathers attended an average of 3.2 (SD = 4.6) out of a total of 16 possible sessions of the DAD MAP curriculum (Sarfo, 2018).
- An evaluation of The Ridge Project's community-based TYRO Dads program found that fathers attended an average of half (M = 5.31, SD = 3.81) of 10 possible sessions and that 40 percent of fathers attended 8 out of 10 sessions, which is the minimum number required to become a program graduate (Kim & Jang, 2018).
- Several studies of attendance at workforce programs for fathers in the child support system found that 31 percent (Pearson, Davis, & Venohr, 2011) and 34 percent of men (Pearson, Kaunelis, & Thoennes, 2012) received no services following project intake, 20 to 23 percent received some level of services, and 46 percent received high levels.
- The People for People Responsible Fatherhood Program in Philadelphia, PA, reports that 70 percent of fathers who start the program attend all sessions, which consists of 28 sessions administered over the course of seven weeks (personal communication).



Low or partial attendance in parenting programs is not unique to fathers. Studies have shown that approximately 10 to 34 percent of mothers of young children who are recruited for parenting programs actually participate in those programs, and of those who do enroll, average attendance ranges from 34 to 50 percent of sessions (Baker, Arnold, & Meagher, 2010; Gadsden, Ford, & Breiner, 2016).



Influences on Attendance

The factors that seem to significantly influence attendance in group-based fathering programs are the intensity of the program, sequencing of program activities, scheduling services, access to transportation and other client factors, and whether program attendance is mandated by a court or other legal entity.

Intensity

Attendance improves when services are offered frequently over a short period of time. The PACT study found that fathers who attended programs that met daily over four weeks received twice as much parenting content compared with fathers who attended programs that met weekly (Mathematica Policy Research, 2017, December). The People for People Responsible Fatherhood Program attributes some of its 70 percent completion rate to the fact that fathers attend workshops four days per week for seven consecutive weeks, the effect of which, according to program administrators, is to “feel like going to work” (personal communication). Administrators of the Fathers and Sons program in Flint, Michigan, which aims to prevent risky health behaviors among African-American boys by strengthening relationships between nonresident, African American fathers and their preadolescent sons, found that attendance improved dramatically when the 15, two-hour class sessions were offered twice a week over seven weeks rather than once a week over 15 weeks (Caldwell, Antonakos, Assari, Kruger, De Loney, & Njai, 2014).

Sequencing

Several programs take advantage of fathers' stronger interest in employment help to get them to participate in services dealing with fathering, parent education, and parenting time. For example, People for People requires fathers to attend all workshop sessions focusing on parenting and healthy relationship before they are allowed to attend a certificate-granting employment program. The Ridge Project requires that participants attend 8 of 10 sessions in its TYRO Dads program in order to access WIOA-funded job training opportunities (Kim & Jang, 2018).

Scheduling

Many programs attribute low attendance to class sessions that are held during weekday and daytime hours that conflict with work schedules (Lanier, 2017). In a similar vein, home visitors report higher levels of fathers' participation in visits when they meet with families during evening and weekend hours, although the same study finds that many workers are not available to meet at these times because of their own family commitments (Sandstrom, Gearing, Peters, Heller, Healy, & Pratt, 2015).

Mandating participation

Programs that mandate fathers' participation tend to have better success at maintaining enrollment although they, too, struggle with attendance challenges (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008). Nevertheless, participants who faced a contempt action and were ordered by a child support judge to attend a program that provided assistance with employment were significantly more likely to participate fully (64%) than their counterparts who were establishing (42%) or modifying (48%) a child support order and faced lighter potential sanctions for non-compliance (Pearson, Kaunelis, & Thoennes, 2012). The court is central to the design of NCP Choices, a statewide program in Texas that aims to address barriers to paying child support by giving delinquent parents the option of paying support on their own, facing the consequences of a contempt action, or enrolling in the program for employment services (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009). Mandatory strategies, however, are hardly



panaceas to the attendance problem, and the evaluators of NCP Choices note that “difficulty in recruiting, enrolling and retaining participants” is one of two fundamental challenges that the program faces (along with implementing services as designed) (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009).

Access to transportation and personal factors

Participation in an economic stability program for fathers in the child support system was higher (69%) among residents of the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, as compared with fathers who lived in a rural area (56%) outside of Springfield (Pearson et al., 2012), presumably because the Springfield residents had better access to transportation. In a similar vein, participation was higher among fathers who reported access to reliable transportation in an economic security program conducted in Colorado during the Great Recession of 2008 (Pearson et al., 2011). Other individual factors that may negatively affect attendance are symptoms of depression and anxiety (Pruett et al., 2009), the quality of the parents' relationship with one other, and access to a reliable car. While one study of an economic stability program found no significant attendance differences by participant age, race, education, marital status, and child contact (Pearson et al., 2012), another study found that fathers who fully participated tended to be older, African American, educated to the high school level or higher, divorced rather than never married, and have relatively low prior earnings (Pearson et al., 2011). Holmberg and Olds (2015) found that fathers were more likely to participate in home visits with nurses when fathers and mothers had frequent contact with one other and when they cohabited compared with living in separate households.



Effects of Attendance on Outcomes

A recent review of fatherhood impact studies found that fathers tended to have more positive outcomes when program dosage was delivered over at least a two-month period and that programs that lasted only a couple of hours did not have large effects (Bronte-Tinkew, Burkhauser, & Metz, 2012). Our review of fatherhood program evaluation papers and reports yielded seven studies that examined the effects of attendance on outcomes, six of which showed positive effects ([see Table 1](#)).



High versus low levels of participation on child support payments

While no differences in post-program payments of child support were found between the treatment and non-treatment groups in a Massachusetts economic security program for unemployed or under-employed noncustodial parents in the child support system, those who participated fully paid 52 percent of what they owed, while those who participated partially or not at all paid a significantly lower amount of 31 percent and 34 percent, respectively (Pearson et al., 2012). And although members of the experimental group in the Arapahoe County, Colorado, Parents to Work program, which also served un- and under-employed fathers, showed significantly higher rates of earning activity than did their counterparts in the control group in the year following project enrollment, more involved participants experienced the best earnings and were the only ones to register significant improvement in child support payment. Payment performance for actively engaged project participants rose from 35.9 to 42.9 percent following enrollment, while payment performance for modestly and unengaged parents remained 40 and 35 percent, respectively, before and after project enrollment (Pearson et al., 2011).

High versus low levels of participation on parenting outcomes

A randomized control trial of the community-based Ridge Project fatherhood program found that the experimental group fathers showed significantly better parenting outcomes than fathers in a wait-list control group on measures of self-perceived coparenting quality and parenting self-efficacy, but that the increases in these outcomes only occurred among fathers who attended eight out of ten sessions (Kim & Jang, 2018). Moreover, high dose experimental group fathers showed better outcomes in several areas (engagement in child-related activities, role identity) even though there was no difference in these outcomes when the experimental and control fathers were compared with no consideration of dosage.

Additional Strategies to Improve Attendance: Incentives and Staff-Client Relationships

Incentives are a key way to improve attendance, and many fatherhood programs provide food during classes, help with transportation in the form of bus tokens or gas cards, work clothes or tools, gift cards, and/or the opportunity to participate in a raffle leading to a monetary award. Hard-skills job-training opportunities and access to real-world jobs are also powerful motivators. For example, the New York Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative found that transportation assistance, stipends, and gift cards helped with participant retention (Tannehill, O'Brien, & Sorensen, 2009), as did transitional jobs or temporary stipends (Sorensen, 2010). And the possibility of becoming eligible for WIOA-funded job training opportunities was so attractive to low-income fathers recruited for the Ridge Project's community-based TYRO Dads program that evaluators found it difficult to generate a wait-list comparison group despite the fact that they offered modest payments for participation in the research (Kim & Jang, 2018).

Child support incentives can also be powerful tools to motivate program enrollment and attendance. This might include suspending enforcement activities during program participation, establishing minimum orders during program participation, assisting with driver's license reinstatement for those who have experienced



a suspension for nonpayment of support, and forgiving arrears owed to the state due to nonpayment and/or interest and penalties levied on arrears balances. In telephone interviews conducted six months after enrollment with 422 of 966 noncustodial parents who attended financial literacy classes in the Tennessee BAFF project between May 2011 and February 2013, 69 percent said that the main reason they attended the financial literacy class was to get their driver's license reinstated. Parents who had had their licenses suspended for nonpayment of support were eligible to get them back if they attended the BAFF class, made a minimal child support payment on a weekly basis, and demonstrated that they were looking for work. To compare, 25 percent said they enrolled and attended the literacy class to earn the \$90 incentive available for full participation (Davis, Pearson, & Thoennes, 2014).

Developing a strong staff relationship with participants is another way to improve attendance. Case managers report that unemployed, low-income fathers are very difficult to serve and employ. Nevertheless, the key to effective participant engagement is to trigger an individual's internal commitment to the program and the plan of action it inspires. Staff skill and commitment are key to reaching disenfranchised populations and convincing them to change their attitudes and behaviors (Pearson et al., 2000). In a similar fashion, People to People credits its 70 percent attendance rate at least in part to the strong worker-client relationships developed during weekly case management sessions conducted in conjunction with classes and the quality of its programming.

Reminder calls and efforts to re-engage fathers who miss classes through "we missed you" calls, text messages, and home visits may also improve attendance. The Fatherhood Research and Practice Network is currently funding a randomized control trial that compares attendance and retention in the Suffolk County, New York, Responsible Fatherhood Initiative among participants randomly assigned to receive one of three treatments: 1) cell phones and/or phone minutes plus twice-weekly text messages and phone call reminders; 2) an additional \$50 gift card at the conclusion of the program and the conduct of a six-week interview; and 3) services as usual (Hayward, 2016). While not a classic incentive, the availability of regular makeup classes improves rates of attendance as well as exposing participants to curricular material they missed.



Next Steps

Although fathers who attend more sessions of a program appear to benefit more from the program than fathers who attend fewer sessions, we need more research on whether attendance is additively associated with better outcomes (i.e., fathers benefit more with each additional session attended), or if there is an attendance (i.e., dose) threshold that impacts outcomes. Nor can we rule out the possibility that something else, such as higher motivation levels, underlies both the better attendance and outcome patterns demonstrated by fathers who participate more fully. Future research should measure attendance in relation to outcomes and examine the characteristics of higher and lower attending fathers and the correlates of attendance patterns.

Since many programs have multiple components, researchers should pay particular attention to measuring attendance in all fatherhood services and examine outcomes in relation to holistic and segmented attendance patterns. For example, a study of fathers at CFUF found that fathers were more likely to provide informal child support to children after attending the DADS MAP curriculum, but only if they attended few or no sessions of an employment support program offered by CFUF, which likely had delivered an identical message on the importance of providing financial support (Sarfo, 2018).

It will also be important for researchers to examine fathers' outcomes in relation to attending sessions covering specific content areas. For example, fathers may show improved parenting skills when they attend sessions addressing those skills but not when missing those sessions and attending sessions addressing other topics such as healthy relationships. More to the point, since attendance may reflect program quality, researchers might consider exploring ways of measuring quality that involve developing measures of staff experience, facilitation skill, and program organization.

Programs should explore the feasibility of providing meaningful, real-world attendance incentives. This would include access to WIOVA-funded job training opportunities, subsidized jobs, and child support incentives such as reinstatement of suspended driver's licenses and/or forgiveness of state-owed child support arrears. Of course, being able to offer these incentives to fathers requires programs to collaborate closely with local child support and workforce programs, and success is far from guaranteed. Nevertheless, the fact that some programs are succeeding in brokering beneficial incentive arrangements is instructive and should motivate other programs to try.

Finally, while every effort should be made to find ways to improve fathers' attendance, it might make sense for programs and researchers to determine what are realistic attendance expectations for low-income fathers, and then to tailor programs to those fathers. Researchers should assist with determining whether gains in father involvement and parenting skills can be obtained from programs that require attending fewer sessions. There is already a precedent for this approach in the field of relationship education with low-income parents (Halford et al., 2015). One possibility would be for programs to implement a short program for fathers (e.g., two to three sessions) followed by a longer program for fathers who wish to be engaged longer.



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Table 1. Responsible fatherhood studies measuring outcomes for different levels of attendance

Name	Description	Outcomes
The Head Start Program <i>(Fagan & Iglesias, 1999)</i>	Quasi-experimental study comparing fathers in five intervention sites with fathers in matched comparison sites that received no intervention. Intervention group: low (1 to 4 hours; n=22), adequate (5 to 21.5 hours; n=15), and high (more than 21.5; n=18).	Positive association between high-dosage participation in the intervention and increased father involvement with children at post-treatment. The children of high-dosage intervention fathers also showed higher mathematics readiness change scores. Children in the low-dosage comparison group showed a significant increase in behavior problems.
TYRO Dads <i>(Kim & Jang, 2018)</i>	Experimental study comparing 137 in the treatment group and 115 in the control group. Researchers examined four different levels of dosage (participation in a fatherhood class): no (0 sessions), low (1 to 4 sessions), medium (5 to 7 sessions), and high dosage (8 to 10 sessions). There was a threshold for the treatment effect at eight sessions when using no dosage as the reference category.	As treatment group fathers attended more sessions, fathers' parenting satisfaction, self-efficacy, and perception of coparenting quality also increased. High-dosage fathers benefitted the most from the program. The number of sessions attended had no effect on how frequently the fathers engaged in parenting activities with the child.
Parents to Work <i>(Pearson, Davis, & Venohr, 2011)</i>	Experimental study comparing 600 in experimental group and 350 in control. Among 600 parents in the experimental group, 46% participated fully (3+ employment services), 23% participated partially (1 to 2 services), and 31% did not participate in any service. Full participants were more likely to be older, African American, educated to the high school level or higher, have lower earnings and were divorced rather than never-married. Full participants were significantly more likely to report access to reliable transportation and to have court action pending on their child support case. There were no differences in participation behavior for other barriers to employment including criminal history, mental health problems, and homelessness.	Post-program earnings were significantly higher, and earnings declines associated with the 2008/2009 recession were significantly lower for members of the experimental group, but both outcomes were significantly better for active participants as compared with their less active counterparts. Child support payment patterns improved significantly following project participation only for members of the experimental group who were actively engaged in Parents to Work.
Massachusetts Parent Support Program <i>(Pearson et al., 2012)</i>	Quasi-experimental study comparing 296 parents in the treatment group with a retrospective comparison group consisting of 146 cases. Researchers examined utilization of employment services among 296 participants. 34% completed only the initial intake at the court, 20% participated partially and completed 1 to 9 employment activities, and 46% participated fully and completed 10 or more employment services. The average number of employment services utilized was 6, while the median number of employment services utilized was 9. Participants' participation ranged from 0 to 13 services.	Those who fully participated in workforce activities paid a significantly greater proportion of the child support they owed (52%) than did those who participated partially (31%) and those who participated in no employment services (34%).

Name	Description	Outcomes
Supporting Father Involvement study <i>(Cowan et al., 2009)</i>	<p>Experimental study. Fathers were randomly assigned to three groups: low-dose comparison group, father intervention group, and a couple intervention group. Median attendance among those enrolled in the fathers' groups was 67%. 9% of fathers attended every meeting of the 16-week program (32 weeks), 40% attended more than 25 hours, and 67% attended more than 19 hours. In the couples group intervention, median attendance was 75% for fathers and 80% for mothers. For fathers, 11% attended all sessions, while 18% of all mothers attended all sessions. Among fathers, 61% attended more than 25 hours, and among mothers, 60% attended more than 25 hours.</p>	<p>Participants in couples' groups showed more long-term effects than those in father-only groups (or those in the low dose comparison group). These long-term effects included fathers' engagement with children, couple relationship quality, and children problem behaviors. Self-selected dosage effects were not examined due to low variability of attendance.</p>
Baltimore Responsible Father Program at the Center for Urban Families <i>(Sarfo, 2018)</i>	<p>Experimental study consisting of 89 fathers in the treatment group and 75 in the control. Intervention group fathers attended about a quarter of all sessions (3 of 16 sessions), while those in the control condition attended around 4 sessions. Across both groups, approximately 18 percent of father attended at least half of workshop sessions, 36 percent of fathers attended at least a quarter of all workshop sessions, and 100 fathers (61%) attended at least one workshop session. The control group attended about one additional session on average, but session dosage did not vary significantly between the two groups. There were no significant dosage differences between the treatment or control.</p>	<p>Fathers' program attendance had no significant effect on fathers' outcomes.</p>
Building Assets for Fathers and Families in Tennessee (BAFF) <i>(Davis, Pearson & Thoennes, 2014)</i>	<p>Pre-test/post-test one group study consisting of 1,334 low income noncustodial parents in the child support system enrolled in a five-hour financial education class that included information on child support. 26.9% of the parents (n=359) participated in the class plus a one-on-one financial/child support counseling session.</p>	<p>Fathers who attended a financial education class registered an increase of 2.6 to 8.7% in post-enrollment versus pre-enrollment child support payments, while those who attended both the class and had an individual financial counseling session registered increases of 11 to 18%.</p>